The Luck of the Darrells

By

James Payn

THE

LUCK OF THE DARRELLS

VOL. III.

PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
LONDON

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LUCK OF THE DARRELLS

A NOVEL

BY

JAMES PAYN

AUTHOR OF

'BY PROXY' 'THE CANON'S WARD' 'THICKER THAN WATER' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.

1885

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OF

THE THIRD VOLUME.

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CHAPTER XXXI.

RETROSPECTIVE.

A COUPLET of an old epigram tells us that—

> If life were a thing that men could buy,
> The rich alone would live, the poor would die;

and there are many things besides life (though the writer seems to have had some doubt of it) which cannot be secured by any expenditure of cash. One of them is silence concerning our errors or our crimes. There is much more blackmail paid in the world than the world has any idea of, but very little turns out to be what it pretends to be, hush-money. If there is any stain upon a man's conscience, if there is any

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slur upon a woman's honour, it is better that they should have it out at once, like a quarrel, than pay a fellow-creature to hold his tongue about it.

It will not, I suppose, be imagined that Hester Darrell had ever done anything of a nature that necessitated a bribe to conceal it. But, nevertheless, she had given two thousand pounds, upon the understanding that silence should be observed on a matter concerning somebody else. Having performed that act of imprudence she had thought it perfectly safe from discovery, and with good reason, since he who possessed her secret was at least as much interested in keeping it as she herself. Nor had he indeed betrayed her; the circumstance was the result of accident, which rarely fails to reveal such matters even when our confederate has kept his word.

It is a matter of doubt as to how far a thoroughly selfish and unprincipled man is capable of entertaining love, save as a

mere passion. It is certain that the poet's lines—

> Love took up the harp of life and smote on all the strings with might,
> Struck the chord of self, that trembling passed in music out of sight,

is never applicable to him: his love is selfish. On the other hand, to gratify it he is capable of actions that look very like self-sacrifice. Such men, for example, will link their lives for life with poverty (though poverty is certainly distasteful to them) in order to gain their object. Even if this is done merely because the present temptation overmasters them, it proves how strong the temptation is; for such men, however apparently reckless, keep their own advantage (or what they consider to be so) well in sight, and even for a great distance. They look ahead (though their vision may be distorted) as far as the wisest.

Digby Mason had fallen in love with Hester Darrell as far as his nature permitted him to

feel that emotion for anyone but himself; and certainly much more deeply than those who knew him best could have thought possible. We know how Mrs. Brabazon had objected to his *tendresse* for the girl, and had endeavoured to combat it. He had expectations from his aunt, and in a general way was solicitous to please her, but in this case he was resolute and not to be advised. The vehemence and intensity of his passion was such that at last she was carried away by it, and even consented to forward his views. She was not, indeed, aware, as was her nephew, how very ill-provided with this world's goods Hester had been left, but she knew that it was a 'bad match' for him, and nevertheless had done her best to bring it about. She had persuaded Hester to grant him an interview upon the ground that he had something of a private and important nature to disclose to her; but she had imagined that this was merely a ruse upon her nephew's part in order to gain a hearing. Hester had thought

the same, but she could hardly say so, and had been therefore unable to resist Mrs. Brabazon's request.

The first words of the young man had confirmed her suspicions. After expressing in delicate and well-chosen phrase his sympathy for the misfortune that had befallen her, he had begun at once to speak of his devotion. Nothing else, he said, could have excused his intrusion at such a time. Her father and himself had been the best of friends, but she was now associated with those who, for some reason or other, he knew not what, were hostile to him. Mr. Philip Langton had a dislike to him, and he was afraid that day by day under his influence she would become prejudiced against him; he had therefore come to plead for himself while her ears were yet open to the language of an honest and devoted heart. He knew beforehand, he said, that there were many objections to him: for one thing, that he had lived a life of pleasure; but he reminded

her, with great dexterity, that within her own knowledge it was possible for a man so to live and yet to be very lovable. It was true that he was not wealthy, but he had a competency to offer her, and was not without expectations. It had come to his knowledge that she herself had been left with smaller means than her friends had anticipated, and that knowledge had precipitated his avowal of affection; his greatest happiness would be to share what he had with her; he loved her for herself alone. If she would but consent to his suit, nay, if she would only give him hope, it would be an incentive to exertion; she would thereby save him from himself as well as secure his happiness; for her sake he would become an altered man. Finally, he threw himself upon his knees and declared his passion in the most vehement terms.

It was a splendid piece of acting, and the more effective because it was by no means all acting. His eloquence and fervour had at least

compelled her to listen to him. Moreover, she judged, and judged rightly, that it was better to hear him to the end, lest he should flatter himself he had some argument in reserve that might alter her fixed resolve.

When it became her turn to speak, with courtesy, but without the least touch of tenderness, she definitely rejected him.

'I do not love you, Mr. Mason,' she said quite calmly, 'and I never can love you.'

'Nevertheless, I still love *you*,' he replied with equal calmness.

Then he took from his pocket a slip of paper, and placed it in her hand.

'What is this,' she said, 'and why do you give it to me?'

'I give it to you,' he replied in tones of the tenderest respect, 'that you may destroy it and never trouble yourself about it any more. If your answer had been favourable to my suit I should have presented it to you upon our marriage-day; but even as it is, it is still yours.

Take it and tear it up. It is impossible for me from your loss to derive any advantage.'

The slip of paper was an I O U for two thousand pounds, addressed to Mason, and signed by Colonel Darrell.

'I do not understand,' faltered Hester; 'did—does my father owe you this money?'

'Unquestionably.'

'Then why do you not make your claim to the proper person, his executor?'

'First, because, as I have said, I do not wish to do so. Is it likely that I should so straiten, nay, impoverish, the woman that I love? Secondly, because Mr. Langton would stand, and very properly, upon his legal rights and decline to pay it. The money was lost at play.'

'Lost at play!' echoed Hester in a horrified whisper; 'did my father lose two thousand pounds to you at cards?'

'I am afraid he did; do not suppose, however, that I was so great a winner. I lost to

others, though I chanced to win of him. It is the fortune of war.'

Hester heard his voice, she knew that he spoke in earnest and deprecating tones, but she knew not what he said. Her mind was filled with distress and pain; in spite of herself she knew that she was associating the memory of her beloved dead with shame. It was surely nothing less than wicked to have been so reckless. She had known of course that her father played, and for high stakes, but she would have repelled with scorn the imputation of his having been a gambler. Yet what else could the man be called who had lost so vast a sum at the card-table? The Colonel had fallen short indeed of her ideal of him: the feet of her idol, she now perceived, had been of clay; but, after all, it was only the feet. If she had lost some of her respect for him, she did not love him one whit the less. If she could not, as before, have met his traducers with a denial, she could at least perhaps preserve his reputation, and

keep the knowledge of his shortcomings from others.

'Does anyone know,' she faltered, 'of the existence of this—this obligation to you, Mr. Mason, besides yourself?'

Mr. Mason hesitated; for the moment he was unable to get to the back of her mind, a difficulty that need excite little surprise. The preposterous notion even occurred to him that if he replied in the affirmative she might take him at his word and tear up the I O U; even the sharpest of scoundrels is at fault when he has to deal with pure and honest people.

'No,' he answered presently, 'not a soul except myself is aware that I possess that document; not a soul shall ever know it if——'

'There is a proviso then,' put in Hester quickly; 'I thought so.'

Mr. Digby Mason's face flushed — well, scarcely like a rose, let us say a peony. His stupid doubt of her integrity had caused him to

show the cloven hoof too soon, and he knew it. Perceiving his mistake there was nothing for it but to go on the other tack and trust her unreservedly.

'There is no proviso,' he answered vehemently. 'Good heavens! do you suppose me capable of making a bargain with you? Whatever determination you may come to, Miss Darrell, that bit of paper is yours; it is impossible, you say, to love me; let me at least earn your gratitude. Let me say to myself when I go hence—cast down and well-nigh desperate, my one chance of becoming a better man denied me—that I have been able to do you a service.'

'No, Mr. Mason, that must not be,' was Hester's quiet reply; 'I shall pay my father's debt.'

Mr. Mason faintly smiled, and shrugged his shoulders.

'You think you will, my dear Miss Darrell, but you will only cancel it. As I told you, it

is not a legal claim; you have only to show it to your guardian, and since there was no "value received" for it, it will become waste paper. I did not, you may therefore say, make much of a sacrifice when I begged you to tear it up, but that is not quite the case.'

'You mean, had my father been alive he would, if he could, have paid it?'

The flush died away from the other's cheek; he became deadly pale,

'I need not say to your father's daughter,' he answered gently, 'that Colonel Darrell was a man of honour.'

Hester's mind was a prey to emotion, she had for the moment lost her judgment; her general view of what was right was distorted by the sense of overpowering necessity to do what was best in the particular case presented to her—a most dangerous position in morals. 'Nothing, nothing,' she thought to herself, 'shall prevent my discharging this obligation which, if my father had been alive, would, if undis-

charged, have covered him with disgrace and shame: if I cannot pay it in one way I will in another, though it may wreck my life.' At the same time she was dimly conscious that things were not so desperate as they seemed; Philip Langton's gentle face shone in upon the tempest of her soul and gave her hope; she believed that she could persuade him to let her have the money without insisting upon her disclosing the purpose to which it was to be applied; if she could have understood that it must needs come out of his pocket and not her own, her case would have been pitiable indeed.

'You shall have the money, Mr. Mason,' she said firmly, 'from my own hand.'

Her companion smiled incredulously. 'I do not want the money.'

'You mean that you would prefer the equivalent,' she answered bitterly. 'It would have been more honest and less ungenerous to have said so from the first. Perhaps, however, it is best that we should understand one

another. I promise you, upon my word and honour, that my father's debt shall be paid at any sacrifice.'

'You are not dismissing me then altogether without hope?' he answered naïvely. The eagerness of his heart prevented him from seeing the poor compliment, not to say the irony, her words implied. 'You will allow me to see you again?'

'I do not know,' she cried, putting her hands up to her head with an unconscious gesture of confusion and despair; 'it may or may not be necessary to discuss this matter further. Go, sir, go.'

This would not to most men have seemed a promising dismissal, yet it was by no means without promise for Mr. Digby Mason. He perceived that his only chance of gaining Hester Darrell for his wife lay in her pride, which, if she could not otherwise pay her father's debt, might possibly induce her to discharge it by this means. He was not, however, exacting in

his views of the tender passion, and would have been well content with that arrangement. If such happiness were denied him he would realise two thousand pounds, a sum that was just then of vast importance to him. The I O U he was well satisfied was safe in Hester's hands, and what was of quite as much consequence to him, her sentimental regard for her father's memory was a sufficient guarantee that the whole transaction should be kept secret. We know how matters turned out, that Hester's confidence in her powers of persuasion with Philip Langton was not misplaced, and that she obtained the money without divulging the nature of her need of it. It was paid to Hester's order, who forwarded it without a word to Digby Mason, who in his turn endorsed it. Here, as he had thought, the matter ended; but when Philip Langton sent for his banker's book his cheques happened to arrive with it (which was not the custom with Mr. Mason's bank), and the murder—or, to speak more accurately, the robbery—was out.

Little as she guessed the mischief she had done to herself, or rather to her guardian, poor Hester now too late lamented her folly in not having made him her confidant at first. Every word of his letter—what it implied as well as what it expressed—was, she felt, deserved. No wonder that in his eyes she stood humiliated, if not disgraced. For the last twelve hours what had he been thinking of her father's daughter? For the next twelve hours, and perhaps even afterwards, what must he still think of her?

At some length, for explanations are always lengthy, and this one might have taxed a readier pen, Hester laid the whole case before her guardian, acknowledging her error in having withheld her confidence from him, and pleading for forgiveness. 'If I had told you of this debt,' she said, 'you would have declined, and would have been justified in declining, to pay it; but how could I have borne the obligation, and to such a creditor?' She did

not, indeed, tell him of the alternative that had been hinted at. It is probable that, whatever had happened, she could never have induced herself to take so desperate and fatal a step; the very remembrance of having been so near the brink of it made her shudder; but with that exception she told him all.

Her letter finished, a heavy load indeed was lifted from her mind; but how different her position was to what it had been before that confession was necessitated! She had failed in her well-meant endeavours to conceal the infirmities of her father, and she had covered herself with humiliation in the eyes or her best friend. The four walls of the room seemed to stifle her; she threw on her hat, and taking care to avoid meeting any of the family, made her way into a small library which had a door, she knew, opening into the rose-garden—a deep sunk and retired spot, with an arbour lined with pine-cones, and looking out

through trellis-work, on which a few roses still lingered, upon the moat. In this shady and secluded place she took her seat. The repose was grateful to her, for the mental emotions, especially when they are of a painful kind, produce an exhaustion quite as great as that of physical exertion; on the other hand, she was in no mood for sleep. The immediate strain upon her thoughts had slackened—she had dropped her letter into the box in the hall as she came along—and they wandered within her at will, through all the phases of her past life, imbuing her with a tender melancholy, such as old people feel when they revisit the haunts of their youth. Young as she was, her girlhood seemed to be at an immense distance; she recalled it rather as something she had read in a book that had greatly interested her, than as a personal experience; her later life, with its far more important incidents, had swallowed it up like an Aaron's rod. What vitality it had was borrowed from the remembrance of her

father; his occasional visits to her while at school, his presents, his treats, the hundred little acts which showed his devotion to her, rose before her now—witnesses to character, in mitigation of her late judgment of him. It was the old defence of the Egyptian queen. Whatever ill he had done her through his unhappy weakness, still he had loved her with all his tender heart. She believed that though he was dead he loved her still; it was even possible that at that very moment his spirit was near her somewhere, conscious of her trouble, remorseful for the share that he had had in it. . . . The last reflection had hardly crossed her mind before she repented of it. Had she not a thousand causes for gratitude to him to set against this one of complaint? Thanks, and not forgiveness, was the debt she owed him. Mechanically she stretched forth her hands and murmured words, assuring him of her unaltered love; the flutter of the rose-leaves, the murmur of the stream, were all that replied to her; but they

sounded to her like a sigh of intense relief. For the first time in her life she experienced that ecstasy with which the saints of the earth alone are credited—the communion with a departed soul. Stripped of all earthly dross, but instinct still with love, she felt that his spirit was hovering near her, yearning for the embrace that was denied him, and solicitous for her good. In the past he had given her advice such as seemed good to him; but he no longer regarded her with the same eyes. How best could she please him now? She was too loyal to say to herself, by avoiding the rock on which he himself had split—that of self-indulgence; it was rather the recollection of her cousin's example that inspired the reply, 'by self-abnegation.'

If she could only bring herself, like Maria, to live for others, she felt that she would be taking the surest way to comfort that departed soul. After all, what was this life, with its joys and sorrows?

Here she was interrupted by a voice she knew, singing softly to the music of the oar:

'We twa have fished the Kale sae clear
And streams of mossy Reed;
We've tried the Wansbeck and the Weir,
The Teviot and the Tweed;
And we will try them once again,
When summer suns are fine,
And throw the flies together yet,
For the days o' lang syne.'

It was only a fisherman's song, though both words and tone had an exquisite pathos in them; but it agitated her greatly. The sound of oars was now very distinct, and she knew that in another moment the boat with its tenant would pass close before her; she shrank back into the corner of the arbour in hopes to escape observation, with her hand lightly pressed upon her heart, which beat so fast and loud that it seemed itself to be a source of peril:

'Tis many years sin' first we sat
On Coquet's bonny braes,
And many a brother fisher's gane,
An' clad in his last claithes;
An' we maun follow wi' the lave——'

Here the singer paused, and, with oars suspended, murmured, 'Is that you, Miss Darrell?' Then, without waiting for a reply, he brought the boat to bank and stepped out at her feet.

CHAPTER XXXII.

SELF-SACRIFICE.

EVER since her conversation with Maria respecting Captain Drake, it had been Hester's especial care to give him no opportunity for private talk with her: to avoid his society was impossible; but whenever he had shown the least symptom of becoming confidential she had turned the conversation to some general topic, or imported others into it. Notwithstanding all which precautions she now found herself face to face with him in the most private and secluded spot that the grounds of Medbury afforded.

The circumstances in which she was placed were so peculiar that, in crediting him with tender feelings towards herself, it was impossible

to accuse herself of vanity; she would have been glad indeed to find that she had altogether misconceived the nature of his attentions; but she had recognised it only too well. As he stood between her and the sun at the entrance of the arbour his shadow fell not only upon her face and form, but upon her very heart, and chilled her blood. The moment had come, she knew, for the sacrifice on which she had long resolved, and which her recent reflections had approved; yet for the first time she was conscious of its cost. How tender and true looked that handsome face, that seemed to defy the light that beat upon it to find one symptom of a baseness! How strong and manly was his form, and yet how gentle, almost to womanliness, was the tone in which he addressed her! 'I went up to the Castle this afternoon,' he said, 'in hopes to have a few words with you, Miss Darrell, but you were not downstairs. Lady Barton told me she thought you had had some news of a serious nature. I trust it was not bad news.'

'It was not pleasant news,' she answered quietly. 'Still, it was what any reasonable person would have expected; one should not complain of even bad news when one has deserved it.'

'It seems impossible,' returned the young man naïvely, 'that you should deserve anything bad. It would be very sad to receive two unpleasant communications on the same day; and I hardly know whether the one I am about to make to you—which I have had in my mind, Miss Darrell, to make these many days—will be welcome or otherwise. Sometimes I have ventured to think you were not averse to me; and then, again, at others you have seemed so indifferent, and even cold. And then—which is worst of all—I feel so utterly unworthy of you.'

For an instant or two she answered nothing, though she was well aware that it behoved her to answer, to nip in the bud the declaration of his hopeless passion. She drank in his words

with a feverish delight that she had no power to control; barren and unfruitful though they need must be, as the last words of love to dying ears, they filled her whole soul with the same sense of joy. She was for the moment carried away by the strong tide of rapture, and only by a great effort gained the land.

'It is possible you may misunderstand me,' he went on, still more gently than before; 'it may well seem surprising to you that after so short an acquaintance I should presume——'

'No, no, Captain Drake,' she put in, in resolute and most vehement tones, 'there is no question of presumption, and still less of unworthiness; but what you speak of can never be. There are reasons, believe me, which render it utterly and absolutely impossible.'

'That there are reasons which may seem insurmountable I admit, Miss Darrell,' he replied gravely. 'That there are drawbacks and objections to my offer enough and to spare I can easily imagine. It would, indeed, be very

difficult to point out its advantages; but somehow, in a matter of this kind, one omits to weigh the pros and cons. One is hurried on—perhaps to the destruction of one's hopes—by an irresistible impulse. When I had first the pleasure of meeting you I said to myself, "This is a girl for whom I have no passing fancy; it must, I think, be love." When afterwards I found myself thinking of you—though you were unknown to me even by name—and picturing to myself every incident of our chance meeting, recalling every word you spoke to me and every look you gave me, then I felt sure of it. "If I ever see her again," I said to myself, "I will ask that girl to be my wife." When I found myself thrown together with you once more on life's journey, was it strange if I took it for something more than a happy chance? It seemed to me the finger of Fate. Miss Darrell, I love you, and though I have little more to offer you than my love——'

'Captain Drake, I entreat you to forbear, interrupted Hester vehemently. 'I am conscious—I feel in every fibre of my heart the honour you have done me. As for advantages, it seems to me that you would be the loser and I the gainer in every way in the case suggested; but such considerations do not enter into the question: there are other reasons infinitely more important that compel me to decline your proposition. When I say that it would be dishonourable in me even to entertain it in my thoughts, I am certain that a nature so generous, so chivalrous, as your own, will forbear to press it.'

The Captain regarded her with a pained and steadfast look, that she remembered afterwards for years. 'Am I to understand from what you say, Miss Darrell,' he inquired earnestly, 'that I am anticipated—that someone else has been beforehand with me in asking the honour of your hand?'

She turned pale to the very lips, and in-

clined her head in assent. She was telling no untruth, for had not Mr. Digby Mason been beforehand in proposing to her? But in the sense in which he must needs understand her it was, it must be confessed, a disingenuous reply. Whatever of wrong-doing belonged to it was not, however, for her own sake, but for another's; while, on the other hand, no falsehood (as she was only too well aware) could have brought more severe or more immediate punishment upon its utterer. She had shattered her lover's hopes, as she believed, for his own good—for, independently of Maria's love for him, she could give him wealth and restore him to the station he had once occupied—but at the same time she had shattered her own, without pretence of 'good.' There seemed no happiness left for her in the world; the gates of an earthly paradise had been opened to her, but she had closed them with her own hand. When she looked up again, half in hope half in fear, of a glance, or a word of farewell, her

companion had fled. The turf and the stream had given no note of his departure; the only trace of his presence was to be found in her own heart, where, indeed, it seemed graven for ever, 'bitten in' by the acids of disappointment and despair.

There are occasions when with the knowledge that we have done right, conscience itself is unable to make head against the stream of regret; when, though the temptation has not proved beyond our powers, our victory seems less welcome than defeat; when, though virtue may be its own reward in the long run, the result of its action in the meantime appears deplorable. It seemed to Hester Darrell that she had wrecked her life.

The solemnity and hush at midnight in a country landscape have been often experienced, and almost as often described; the pale, weird moonlight and the quaint shadows cast by the trees, are surroundings among which it is easy for the dullest imagination to feel awed and

isolated; but there is also sometimes a depth of solitariness in the summer afternoon. The sun may be high in the heavens, there may not be a cloud in the sky, but all that brightness and lightness may be instinct with a sublime silence, or with sounds that 'make stiller' by their presence 'the inviolable quietness.'

It was so now, or so it seemed to be to Hester, left alone with her own thoughts in that arbour in the rose-garden; the high wall of the terrace behind it, the broad girdle of the moat in front, gave it a sense of isolation very consonant with her own feelings. Not a leaf was stirring, nor a blade of grass; there was a drowsy hum of insects, and now and then the leap of a fish, but of any human existence there was neither a shadow nor a sign; it seemed to her that, in fact as in spirit, she was utterly alone in the world. As reflection began to resume its sway, she gradually accepted for herself in the future this position, which nature thus presented her as though for an ensample.

Had she been a Catholic, her mind would no doubt have turned to the religious life, as it is understood in that communion; but even so much of society as a convent affords would in her case be denied to her. Henceforward she foresaw with pitiless clearness that her existence would be passed alone. Sympathy with others she might have; if it was not to be so, if she were to take no pleasure in the life of active well-doing which lay before her, her lot would be miserable indeed; but of reciprocity in that way there would be none. To no human ear would she ever confide her trouble.

The case, unhappily, is common enough; the husband dies, and the old and childless widow, though life is emptied of all joys, has to live on in single wretchedness: but she, at least, has had her day; it is only the evening of existence that she spends in solitude. Before Hester's eyes there stretched a whole lifetime, like one of those French landscapes so familiar to the traveller by diligence in old days—dull,

flat, and solitary, its rows of poplars tapering to the grave.

Presently she rose and walked towards the house. In that hour or two her whole being, as it seemed to her, had suffered change; her step had no longer the elasticity of youth; her heart had lost the pulse of hope. It was, however, above all things necessary to conceal this alteration from the world without. However weak she may have shown herself in her late struggle, Hester was far too proud to seek commiseration from others; she was not one to wear the willow before the crowd, and far less that mask of pretended cheerfulness which says to all beholders, 'I show a smiling face; do not distress yourself on my account, but Heaven only knows the pain I suffer.' It was probable, nevertheless, that she could not altogether discard from her countenance the impression of recent events; there were the traces of tears, too—for she had wept bitterly—which it was absolutely necessary to wash away before

meeting the eyes of others. She endeavoured, therefore, to reach her own apartment unnoticed and unseen, as she had come. In the library, as usual, there was no one, no one in the hall, nor on the great staircase; the corridor above was clear, and she had even gained her own room and had her hand upon the door, when she heard her own name pronounced.

'Hester, I want a few minutes' conversation with you, my dear.'

It was the voice of Lady Barton which thus addressed her: the words were kind enough, but the tone in which they were spoken was authoritative almost to severity.

Her aunt was standing at the door of her boudoir, where she was evidently awaiting her, and where, as it struck her, she had probably been on the watch for her for some time. It was certain that Lady Barton had something of importance to communicate, or something which she considered of importance; whatever it was,

was Hester's bitter reflection, it could now matter little to her. There was henceforth nothing that could matter.

She obeyed her aunt's beckoning sign and entered the boudoir, an apartment as large as an ordinary drawing-room, and handsomely, if not tastefully, furnished. By one of the windows stood an old-fashioned escritoire that had certainly not been supplied by the upholsterers who had contributed those splendid curtains, those elaborate arm-chairs, and that glazed bookcase, with its smooth and gilded treasures. The lid of the desk lay open, as though its proprietress had been busy with its contents when she had heard her niece's step in the corridor. Lady Barton motioned Hester to a seat, closed the door, and turned the key, and, standing in front of her with folded arms, regarded her with an expression of great seriousness, not unmixed, however, with commiseration.

'In what I am about to say to you, Hester,

I am performing a very painful duty. If it distresses you, I do assure you, however appearances may be to the contrary, that it distresses me no less. If I seem to be unkind, I pray you to believe that I am not so.'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A CONFESSION.

THE unexpectedness of her hostess's appeal did not affect Hester as the other had probably anticipated; when the soul is troubled to its depths we are proof against all surprises; but its tenderness and consideration moved her very much.

'I can never think you unkind, Lady Barton,' she replied; 'how is it possible for me to do so when you have opened your doors to me and treated me as your own daughter?'

This was true, but then her behaviour to her own daughter was by no means demonstrative of affection; moreover, what spoke volumes, her niece, even when acknowledging

her indebtedness to her, had addressed her not as 'aunt' but as Lady Barton.

'Still there *is* a difference,' observed her ladyship gravely. 'That must be my excuse for what I am about to say. I am your aunt, it is true, and your hostess, but I am Maria's mother.'

'And you have the best of girls for your daughter,' said Hester gently, 'the kindest, the truest, the purest.'

'She is a good girl, no doubt,' said Lady Barton. 'I am sure you are fond of her.'

'There is nothing that I would not do for her,' replied Hester earnestly; 'and when I had done it the obligation would still remain on my side.'

She could say this quite truthfully now, for her sacrifice had been already made; an hour ago or so she could not have said it.

'The friendship of women, however,' returned Lady Barton, 'has always one reservation. When another passion intervenes for

a common object, respect, affection, gratitude, even the ties of blood are all forgotten. Friendship is then scattered to the winds, and only too often envy and hatred take its place.'

'It would never be so with your daughter and me,' replied Hester firmly.

'No; because you will carry off the prize, and Maria, being, as you say, little short of a saint, will forgive you your victory.'

Lady Barton's tone had altered, its gentleness had vanished; she spoke with scorn, though not with heat. 'Do you suppose that I am blind, Hester,' she went on with restrained vehemence, 'because poor Maria is blind? Can you say to me without telling a falsehood that Francis Drake is not your lover? You need not speak, for your face speaks for you. Now let me tell you what you are about to do. Maria has loved him from the first, and has never loved another. Her happiness, so far as matters of this world are concerned, is bound up in him. I have done all I could to insure

it. I have invited him here day after day—I confess it—with that intention. His father is as desirous he should marry Maria as I am myself. The Castle would by that means return in time to the old hands, and the fortunes of his family be re-established. You will say, perhaps, that Captain Drake does not reciprocate Maria's attachment to him. That is true; but how few men ever do love as they are beloved! He has at least a great respect and regard for her which was ripening slowly into love, until you came. Nay, hear me out, I don't say you are to blame for it, Hester; it seems that you were old acquaintances (of which of course I knew nothing, or I would never have had you here); but however it comes about, you have estranged this young man's love from the object with which it was heretofore content. In doing this you have done us a grievous wrong. It is a breach of hospitality, it is a wrong to friendship, it is a poor return, I must even add, for the kindness you have received

at our hands. That is not a pleasant thing to have to say; you must forgive me. I am a mother pleading for her daughter's sake. I believe you have the power of doing us this irreparable mischief, but I appeal to your better nature. Again I say I do not reproach you. Up to this day I had flattered myself that you were studiously withholding from this gentleman any encouragement. I had even hopes that your affections were fixed elsewhere.'

'What has altered your opinion of me to-day, Lady Barton?' inquired Hester gently.

The quietness and self-possession of her tone staggered her companion. She had been prepared for defence and even defiance, but not for being cross-questioned in her turn; it struck her that the girl was attempting to throw dust in her eyes.

'It is useless, Hester,' she said contemptuously, 'to affect innocence in this matter. You had a private meeting with Captain Drake this very afternoon.'

'It was accidental,' put in Hester quietly.

'I do not know as to that; at all events it took place. Do you mean to tell me that not a word passed between you that others might not have heard? I see that something happened. Has the mischief been done; have you accepted him?'

'No, Lady Barton, I have rejected him.'

'Rejected him!' replied the other incredulously; 'have my suspicions then been unfounded? Is it possible that his attentions were unwelcome to you?'

'They were unwelcome to me.'

'Then you were not in love with him after all?'

Hester's face grew deadly pale.

'For mercy's sake,' she murmured, 'spare me!'

Lady Barton regarded her for a moment with searching, almost suspicious looks, then with a strange agitated cry dropped on her knees beside her.

'Hester, Hester!' she exclaimed, 'you love him. You have sacrificed yourself for Maria's sake!'

There was the sound of a girl's voice singing in the corridor; its notes were as blithe and joyous as a bird's.

Hester smiled significantly. 'Your daughter will be happy, Lady Barton, as she deserves to be.'

'But you—oh, my poor girl! my heart bleeds for you, while it thanks you; what can I say, what can I do, to prove its gratitude?'

'I only ask for silence; it is absolutely necessary as regards Maria; while for me——'

'Oh, I understand,' interrupted Lady Barton with intense emotion, 'every word of his will be a blow, every look will be a pang. Life under this roof will be a slow torture to you. We have no right to inflict it.'

'It is not your doing, Lady Barton. You have nothing to reproach yourself with.'

'Have I not?' was the vehement rejoinder.

'I have, I have indeed. If I can make no reparation for it I can at least make confession; I can do penance. You have entrusted the secret of your heart to me; I will do the like to you, Hester. You have shown me of what a generous nature is capable; I will show you how a base one can behave itself under the same circumstances. The result in the one case has been an unhappy life; the result in the other—if there is justice in Heaven—will be also in accordance with desert. Listen to me, for it is to your ears above all others that my story should be told; look at me, for it is your eyes above all eyes that should be the witnesses of my humiliation, and pity me while you condemn me.'

Hester obeyed mechanically, though she could hardly believe the senses that were thus appealed to; to see this proud and masterful woman on her knees before her, to hear her reproaching herself with such bitter vehemence and appealing to her for pity, nay, as it almost

seemed, for pardon, seemed to be some delusion of her brain rather than an actual experience.

'Your mother and I, Hester, were sisters, loving ones till love came between us; I was the elder and the wiser in all matters of this world, and believed myself (but there I was wrong) to have the firmest hold of the faith in things to come. She bowed to me in all things, both temporal and spiritual; and looked up to me as a superior being. At a watering-place frequented by many serious persons, but also the resort of people of fashion, we became acquainted with a gentleman whose habits of life were altogether different from our own, but who had great attractions for both of us. His attentions were pretty equally divided between us, but I now know that he paid court to me only to gain better opportunities of recommending himself to my sister. I do not say he deceived me, but his behaviour certainly led me to deceive myself. If I had not been blinded by my love for him, I should perhaps have seen with

what object he cultivated our society; but as it was, I set it down to my own attractions. When my sister came to me one day and in all simplicity, and without the least conception of my feelings towards him, informed me that she had accepted him as her lover, I was almost out of my mind with rage and jealousy. I concealed the cause, however, while at the same time I indulged my hate, for from that moment my love for her had changed to hate. I pointed out the unfitness of such a union. I reminded her of the worldliness and wickedness of the man, and bade her choose, not only between him and me, but between a few months of delusive happiness in this world and the eternity of misery, which would be its penalty, in the next. I did not hesitate to use the most solemn and sacred arguments against the man whose hand I would myself have accepted with rapture; but they were used in vain. She was no longer subservient to my will; she had transferred her allegiance to another master. Then

my heart became as the nether millstone against them both. "If you marry that abandoned man," I said, "I will never see you more nor hold any sort of communication with either of you to your lives' end." She did marry him, and I kept my oath. After some time I married, myself, but not for love; it was for money, but not for money's sake. I had heard tales of my brother-in-law that led me to believe that he would one day be reduced to poverty, and I pleased myself with the reflection that while he and his were suffering from the consequences of his recklessness I should be rich and prosperous. You are saying to yourself, "What baseness!" You cannot picture the depths to which a woman can stoop whose pride has been wounded to the quick; you have cause to be grateful for the gift of an unegotistic nature. My sister died, and yet I could not forgive her. The overtures of reconciliation her husband made to me in the name of her child I rejected with scorn. It may seem incredible to you, but I even re-

sented the patience and simplicity that displayed themselves year by year in my own daughter, because she thereby reminded me of what my sister had been. The milk of human kindness within me was not only changed to gall, but my very blood, the same that had flowed in my sister's veins, was poisoned. Then—then my dear one died.'

The speaker covered her face with her hands, and was silent; her frame was shaken with emotion. She was weeping, or perhaps praying, without a sound. Hester neither moved nor spoke. The self-revelation of this nature, at once so powerful and so weak, had overwhelmed her.

Presently Lady Barton rose, and taking one of Hester's hands in both her own, addressed her with the utmost gentleness. The storm had passed away and left, if no sunshine, peace and softest airs.

'When you came here, my dear, my whole heart would fain have gone forth to meet you;

in your father's daughter I recognised one only less dear to me than my own, but pride still restrained its workings. If I had found you hard, self-willed, and disdainful, like myself, it would almost have been a relief to me; but day by day the wall of reserve that I had built around myself, and which is insurmountable to others, crumbled away before you. Your nature, Hester' (here she smiled), 'is hard to quarrel with, even for one who seeks to quarrel. Presently, however, you became an object of suspicion. I perceived that Captain Drake was paying you attentions; I foresaw that danger threatened my scheme for Maria's future; that the happiness of her life was menaced. Even then—let me do myself so much of justice—I did not blame you. I even fancied that you were doing your best to discourage him. I thought that your affections were placed elsewhere. If I had guessed how matters stood——' Hester held up her hand in piteous entreaty. 'True, I had forgotten my promise. Your heart is suffering

what mine has suffered; but how differently have we borne our cross!' She moved to the desk and threw it open. 'There is his picture, the dearest of my possessions still; how like, how like it is to your dear self! Take it, keep it.'

She placed it in Hester's hands, who gazed upon it with tearful eyes. It was a portrait of her father in his youth, but the lineaments and even the expression were the same that she had known and loved so well; it was her 'dear young papa' a little younger, that was all. She made as if she would give it back, but the other rejected it.

'No; it is a wrong to my husband for me to retain it. For the future to look at you, your father's living image, and to love you, will be sufficient, my noble girl!'

She held out her arms, and Hester fell into them, in a passion of tears. For the first time since that interview with her lover she felt a ray of comfort. She had at least made this

woman happy, whom her father, even if through no fault of his own, had made so unhappy; if otherwise, if he were in any respect to blame, she was making reparation for him. At all events, if, as she believed, he was cognisant of what she was doing he must needs approve of it. It was the first reward of her self-sacrifice.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MR. MOSES JEPHSON.

PYBUS HOUSE is perhaps the handsomest of all the handsome houses on Clapham Common. It has a very large garden, and, as if the flowers of England were not sufficient to flatter the pride of its possessor, it has in addition a huge conservatory filled with tropical plants. It is furnished from the third story to the basement (for there are no attics) with great completeness, and as regards its spacious reception-rooms, even with splendour; but, despite its magnificence, comfort is its leading feature. A great legal functionary, widely known to the past generation, lived in a mighty mansion so badly furnished that a certain noble novelist said of it, 'It is the sort of house one would take

from which to see a man hung.' Pybus House was the very last place any one would have thought of taking for such a purpose. Every chair was comfortable, and had never borne the yoke of an antimacassar: the carpets were of the thickest pile; there were even some very fine pictures by some very old masters. But there were no knickknacks, and there were no books. In the houses of rich men, however illiterate, there is almost always a 'library,' where history in calf and poetry in morocco await, behind glass doors—the paper-knife; and this omission impressed the visitor. Of what calling could be the proprietor of this stately pleasure-house, for whom the art of printing books (for of newspapers there was an ample supply) had been discovered in vain? If he were one of the Clapham sect, however averse to light reading, he would have had an assortment of choice collections of sermons; but to confess the honest truth there was not even a Bible in Pybus House. There was, indeed, what

has been called the British Bible—the 'Peerage,' but even that was not kept for ordinary reasons, but solely for business purposes. The master of the house had not a little to do with the aristocracy of his native land, but he had not the slightest respect for them. This circumstance (if indignation permits) may well arouse the curiosity of the reader as to what profession, trade, or calling such a creature could be. The personal appearance of Mr. Moses Jephson gave little clue to this. He was a short stout man of about fifty years of age; his cheeks were flabby; his head was bald; his eyes had a cunning expression, which, nevertheless, was not destitute of good nature. He fancied that he knew the world better than any man alive—a circumstance that would have speedily brought him to grief had he had to deal with it. His relations, however, were restricted to one portion of the world, which, fortunately for himself, he understood thoroughly. Every 'nobleman and gentleman of independent property, and officer

on full pay' who wanted cash, and a great deal of it, and at once, came to Mr. Moses Jephson for assistance as naturally as a sick man to his physician, or a penitent to his priest. It is needless to say, therefore, that the proprietor of Pybus House was a money-lender, but he was something more. Every 'person of position' who had got into serious trouble and wished to take the nearest way out of it at any cost came to Mr. Jephson for counsel. He was not a lawyer, but he did lawyer's work with equal secrecy and more celerity, and if he exacted for his services higher than even lawyer's pay, his clients rarely grudged it. He was greedy and even grasping, but he was not unconscientious (after his dim lights); and it was rumoured that now and then he had even performed a generous action. It is not indeed to be supposed that he had ever 'returned his fees;' it would have been an outrage on his moral sense to have given back what he had lawfully earned (or perhaps even had earned not quite lawfully,

and with some little risk); but occasionally for an old client he had worked for nothing. It was said at the West End that 'Mr. Jephson was not a bad sort considering,' an elliptical expression of much significance.

On the day after Hester Darrell had despatched her explanation to her guardian, that gentleman presented himself at Pybus House. Mr. Jephson received him with great courtesy, but with a surprise that he took no pains to conceal.

'Proud to see you, I'm sure, Mr. Langton,' were his first words, 'but it's an unexpected pleasure. You're not come to tell me that our little arrangement has broken down, I hope?'

'No, there has been no more trouble about that matter, I am thankful to say.'

'That's good,' said Mr. Jephson, with a sigh of relief. 'I was afraid that somebody was getting to be unreasonable again. Man we can bind, but woman never.'

'It is about a man that I am come to-day. You know Mr. Digby Mason, of course?'

'Do I know my own ledger?'

'I want you to answer me a question frankly concerning him, and then to give me a word of advice.'

Mr. Jephson nodded assentingly. He was a man of few words, but of infinite patience in listening to what others had to say to him.

'Of course I am speaking to you in confidence,' continued his visitor. 'You must not be offended if I impute things to one whom I gather from what you say is a client of yours.'

'You can say anything. There is no witness, and therefore it cannot be actionable. As to Mr. Mason, it is true that I have had dealings with him; but he has washed his hands of me, as he will tell you. They are not, however, clean hands.'

'In a word, then, you think him a scoundrel?'

'I don't think it; I am perfectly convinced of the fact.'

'Still, there are degrees. Do you believe it possible, for example, that he cheats at cards?'

'I should say it was highly probable. It is a difficult thing to do without discovery, but then Mr. Digby Mason is a very clever fellow.'

'You remember Colonel Darrell, of course?'

'Well; a thorough good fellow, reckless, and a little too confident in himself at play, but a perfect gentleman.'

Philip Langton gave a little wince. This compliment to his dead friend from such a quarter was very unpalatable.

'I have reason to believe, Mr. Jephson, that Mason cheated him out of a large sum with marked cards. I ought to say, perhaps, I have suspicions rather than reasons, for, though that impression is strong in my mind, I have no actual proofs. Indeed, though I have obtained some cards with which he played, and won with in a very surprising fashion, I can find

nothing amiss with them, though I have examined them even under the microscope for days.'

'For days? Do you mean by daylight?'

'Well, of course, one can examine them best by daylight.'

'Not when they are things meant to cheat with by candlelight. It was at some club, I suppose, that the thing took place? Just so. Well, even if you had discovered that they were marked, how could you prove that Mason did it—that is, that it was he who introduced the cards into the club? It took Philippe all he knew, remember, to prove that very thing to Napoleon III. in the case of the Paris Cercle.'

'To be sure,' said Langton; 'I have been wasting my time for nothing.' He spoke with chagrin, but his discontent was not without mitigation. This man, who had thus laid his finger with such ease upon the weak spot in his own proceedings, would probably detect what was wrong in another case.

'Whether the Colonel's money was won by fraud or not,' he continued, 'is not of much consequence, since, it seems, it can't be proved. The question now is—with respect, at least, to a large portion of it—whether it was won at all. Do you recognise this signature as genuine?'

Here he placed in the other's hand the I O U for two thousand pounds, signed by Colonel Darrell, a *pièce justificatif* which Hester had naturally enclosed in her letter.

The money-lender scrutinised it with great attention. 'It looks to me all right,' he said. 'One cannot tell for certain about these things, as your experts pretend to do. I prefer, when it is possible, to go by my knowledge of mankind, and my experience of Mr. Digby Mason tells me that he would stop short of forgery. Social disgrace is one thing and penal servitude is another. No; he may have won this money by foul play, but it is my belief that he did win it.'

Philip Langton shook his head. 'I have great confidence in your judgment, Mr. Jephson, but I feel sure there is something wrong here.'

'Well, it is just as well to be fair and above-board while we can,' observed the money-lender, with a significant smile; 'and though I never speak of my clients' affairs to others, the Colonel was, I know, a friend of yours, and, besides, he's dead and it can't matter. Now the fact is that I raised the money to pay for this very I O U myself.'

'You raised the money!' echoed Langton in amazement. 'Raised it for the Colonel to pay Mr. Digby Mason?'

'I have no doubt I did. He told me, at all events, that he wanted two thousand pounds in a hurry to pay a card debt. You know his way. He could sell out his securities at leisure to pay me; but in the meantime the debt of honour must be settled immediately.'

'But it was not settled immediately, for

though it is true he did realise, only a few days before his death, securities for that very amount, Mr. Digby Mason has since put in his claim for the I O U.'

'He has, has he?' returned Mr. Jephson, with an applausive chuckle. 'That's a bold stroke, that is. It is almost a pity that such audacity should be thrown away. He didn't take into account that, since it only records a gambling debt, the document is mere waste paper, otherwise the conception would have been magnificent.'

'I don't understand you, my dear sir.'

'Why, look at the dates. I carry this sort of memoranda in my head, but you shall see for yourself.'

The room in which this interview took place was Mr. Jephson's study, and, indeed, it was devoted to the study (and utilisation) of his fellow-creatures. The walls were hung with pictures of great value, but which he had purchased at comparatively low figures from clients

in haste to realise their ancestral assets; there were cabinets of price, and a statuette or two which would have raised the bidding at Christie's; it was not, in short, at all like a business room. There was a cupboard in it, however—carved with fruit and flowers antiquely, but with a lock of the latest invention—the door of which was sheathed with iron. In this receptacle Mr. Jephson kept the few books he said he cared for (an egotistic confession enough, since they were all written by himself), and from it he now produced a diary.

'I gave the Colonel his two thousand pounds upon the Tuesday, you see' (pointing to the entry with his finger), 'and in three days he repays me principal and interest, and three days after that he's drowned. I've put a query here, I see, in a parenthesis,' interposed Mr. Jephson, with a swift, subtle glance at his companion; 'he *was* drowned, was he not? Just so. Well, he could scarcely have lost the same sum at the same game to the same man

within the week; it's evidently, therefore, the same I O U. The thoughtless Colonel never thought of asking for it, and Mr. Digby Mason has tried to make the document do duty a second time. It was, as I say, audacious, but well timed. Just after a man's death one may almost venture upon anything in the way of claim. On the other hand, how characteristic that he should have forgotten that in law it was null and void! Your scoundrels almost always forget something.'

The whole plan was plain enough, and if poor Hester had been less reticent could never have succeeded.

'He's gone abroad,' said Langton, after a long pause.

'Very likely, and if he had got the money he would have stayed there. Perhaps he will stay there even as it is, for I happen to know that Master Digby Mason is very near the end of his tether. When a man is so very lucky London sooner or later gets too hot for him. Moreover, though of course no one in his

senses would have paid the I O U, he has made his claim, and thereby got himself into trouble. He has endeavoured to extort money under false pretences.'

'No doubt he ought to be in Newgate,' said the other emphatically. 'Well, I am greatly obliged to you for your kind attention, Mr. Jephson. Your time, I know, is valuable. Will you let me know——'

'Put that cheque-book away; I shall let you know nothing,' interrupted the money-lender, smiling. 'Colonel Darrell was an old client of mine, and always behaved to me like a gentleman. There are not so many of that sort that I should forget it. I have got more people out of holes than any man in England, and have been more abused for it; but the Colonel was always reasonable. To have been able to be of any service to you on his behalf is reward sufficient for me.'

'You are very kind, I'm sure. I don't think there is anything else to be said. Good morning, and many thanks.'

'Good morning, Mr. Langton.'

Mr. Jephson accompanied his visitor to the front door, where he stood watching the hansom that carried him away to town.

'How true it is that the world is divided into knaves and fools,' he murmured to himself. 'That gentleman belongs to the lower—I mean the latter class. I am quite sure that he paid that money. What he is thinking about now is how he shall excuse himself as her guardian for wasting two thousand pounds of Miss Darrell's fortune. If she is half sharp he will have to refund it. He did not come here about Colonel Darrell's affairs, but his own—my penetration never deceives me. It is not a bad half-hour's work, however, if I have persuaded Mr. Philip Langton to say a good word wherever he goes for Moses Jephson. As for Master Digby Mason, he must be desperate indeed to have tried such a game. He has bidden his native land good-bye for ever.'

CHAPTER XXXV.

ANOTHER'S JOY.

CAPTAIN FRANCIS DRAKE was as fine a fellow as ever faced a battery, and what is not so constant a companion of courage as is generally supposed, he had a very tender heart. Still he was neither a nincompoop nor a ninny; and though he had been rejected by the woman he loved best in all the world, he was not one to die of a broken heart. Some men who are crossed in love hang themselves; others still more unreasonable as well as wicked, wreak their vengeance upon her whom they profess to adore; but the majority of our sex (and one may even say as much for the other) get over it. If a man

> Cannot find a black eye to his mind,
> Why, then, he must take to a blue one,

sings one who had a pretty wide experience of love making; and sooner or later it generally does happen so.

If Hester Darrell had given any other answer to the Captain than that which he had understood her to give, he would certainly not have desisted from his suit. But since she had said, 'I cannot,' and when he had inquired, 'Has any other person then been beforehand with me in asking for your hand?' she had answered 'Yes,' he had naturally put two and two (or rather one and one) together and supposed her to be bespoke elsewhere. In his opinion it henceforth behoved him as a gentleman to say no more to her; and even to think of her in the old way as little as possible. Being human, however, he did think of her sadly, though without bitterness. The fact was that, though the impression she had made upon him at their first meeting had never been ob-

literated, it had undergone a fading process to which the pictures in the mind are as much subject as those on canvas. For many months he had been thrown into the intimate society of another young woman, comely and pure and tender, and who without the faintest trace of forwardness had caused him to suspect that she was not indifferent to him.

Maria Barton had not indeed given him the sort of encouragement which young ladies are wont to give in such cases. She had neither flirted with nor flouted him; had not 'led him on,' nor affected, on his following her lead, to rebuff him; but she had showed an admiration for his character, if not for himself, which it was impossible to him to ignore. The other circumstances of the case which would have been pronounced by most people to be favourable—the wealth she would inherit, and the fallen fortunes which such an union would repair—were rather against her than otherwise; for the Captain had a proud spirit, and had no

more fancy for disposing of himself in the matrimonial market to the highest bidder than for selling his sword. Still he admired Maria Barton as well as respected her, and on the quiet tide of opportunity was insensibly drifting into love when Hester Darrell suddenly reappeared and swept away the 'low beginnings of content.' He had in no way compromised himself with her cousin; neither by word nor deed had he reciprocated the affection of which he had nevertheless perhaps begun to entertain some suspicion; and being free, he had returned to the allegiance which had through the absence of its object become weakened and attenuated, but had never been discarded.

It was most fortunate for the Captain's future prospects that the advantages of a union with the heiress of the house of Barton had never been urged upon him from without; that Lady Barton had been prudent and reticent, and that Sir Reginald had never hinted at the hopes he had entertained of the recovery of the

family fortunes through his son's marriage. For if pique is one of the most common motives that induce to matrimony, pride is as common a cause for its avoidance. He had no suspicion of course that Hester had been compelled to mention the fact of her rejection of him to Lady Barton; so that his relations with the family at the Castle remained unchanged. There were no winks and nods of approbation to be endured; and above all there was no embarrassment (save what he might feel upon his own account) with Hester. She had chosen, doubtless, some better man.

Still, for his own sake, and for the regard he had for her good opinion, matters continued for sometime much as they had been, between himself and Maria. He was by no means eager to make advances in that quarter, and, under Hester's eye, though it was designedly averted from his proceedings, he could hardly make any immediate transfer of his affections to her cousin. But sooner or later, as he secretly acknowledged

to himself, they would be so transferred. They were not quite the same affections; but they were genuine and honest enough of their kind. A widower may love his second wife as truly as the first; though when it comes to the third, or at all events to the fourth, I am inclined to think—though I speak only from observation and without experience—that the gilt begins to be a little rubbed off the gingerbread.

In the meantime, the news that Hester received from Philip Langton concerning the misdoings of Mr. Digby Mason was of distinct advantage to her. Her money—for she had no idea that it was her guardian's—had gone before, so that there was no new sense of loss to trouble her; while her previous view of Mr. Mason's character had not been so favourable that the revelation of another phase of it had any power to wound her. On the other hand it was a revelation. It helped her to understand that there were more worlds than one, even on this earthly ball; a knowledge which tends more

than any other knowledge to lead us from the contemplation of our particular share in it. While she lived among her fashionable friends in London, her horizon had been extremely limited; fashionable people, as a rule, are the most narrow-minded of created beings, and the most unconscious, not only of the mysteries, but of the facts of existence. Since she had come down to Shingleton it seemed to her that she had for the first time found touch of her fellow-creatures. She visited it almost every day and was getting almost as well known there, though not to the loungers on its Parade, as Maria herself. It was not so much in the contemplation and assuagement of the troubles of others she forgot her own, as that she here found an occupation which took her out of herself. It is the absence of work to do—other than fancy work—that lies at the root of the unhappiness of most young women. Even if their woes are real and not imaginary, they loom much larger than they should do from their ignorance that

woe is the common lot, and consequently from their inability to draw comparisons between their own case and that of others. It does not benefit a fit of the gout to visit a hospital for incurables, but it unquestionably makes us think less of our gout. Though Hester never forgot the loss of her lover, she presently—or rather eventually: for at first the sensation was well-nigh intolerable—learnt to bear it.

It was something that in the reply which Philip Langton wrote to her letter he apologised for the tone of his previous communication, and had nothing but praise to bestow on her conduct. 'It was a great price to pay,' he said, 'for the purpose of shielding your dear father's name from the tongue of detraction, but I do not blame you for it. In the world in which he moved—in my world—such recklessness is common enough; but I can easily understand that it shocked you. If you had confided in me you would have saved yourself a heavy pecuniary loss; but I do not blame

you. You imagined perhaps that the knowledge of his weakness would have lessened my respect for his memory; you were wrong, for he was a man to love in spite of his weakness; but it was an apprehension that does you credit. If it were possible, in short, that I could entertain a greater regard for you, dear Hester, I should do so now.'

This praise was certainly very comforting to her. Nor less consolatory was the gratitude and affection which Lady Barton in private lavished upon her. It seemed that she could never do enough in acknowledgment of the sacrifice that had insured the success of her long-cherished plan and the happiness of her daughter. Like most reticent and cautious persons, where once her trust was placed it was placed implicitly, and if she closely watched her niece's relations with Captain Drake it was upon Hester's account solely and not her own. Her nature, though so different in other respects, was one that could thoroughly sympathise with

the girl in the painfulness of her present position; she even acknowledged to herself that had the case been her own she would have been unable to endure it and would have fled the scene of her misery, no matter at what risk of arousing suspicion, and thereby endangering what she had already gone through so much to secure. To save Hester the embarrassment of the Captain's presence was impossible, for he was (as usual) a daily visitor to the Castle, but it was Lady Barton's constant, though secret care, to keep them asunder, and above all to preserve her from the torture of a *tête-à-tête* with her quondam lover; and about this, to do her ladyship justice, she was quite as solicitous as to 'throw her daughter and the Captain together.'

At first indeed it was difficult to say whether her satisfaction at the progress of affairs between the young couple, or her distress at the cost it entailed upon Hester was the greater; but as time went on—not, as it seemed, without

its healing influences upon the sufferer—Lady Barton permitted herself (as generally happens in the case of other people's calamities) to take a more cheerful view of affairs; her gratitude was as strong as ever but her compunction was less acute. The radiance that began to appear in her aunt's stately but somewhat tristful face was Hester's best reward. It was pleasant, too, to see old Sir Reginald becoming young again as the prospect brightened to him; since even to his eyes, though far less keen than those of his hostess, it was clear his son's heart was tending more and more towards the wished-for direction. It was only now, in fact, when all doubt was removed, that the old gentleman ventured to acknowledge to himself that he had ever entertained a doubt. His manner had been always kind to Hester—he was too much of a gentleman to behave otherwise to one in her position—but there had been a certain impassable barrier between them. In his heart of hearts he had acknowledged that she was

more to his liking, had other things been equal, as a wife for his son; and he had felt that there was a danger of Francis taking a similar view without due consideration of those 'other things.'

This source of anxiety was now removed, as also a certain vague misgiving that Francis, who, though the very apple of his eye, had a very pronounced will and way of his own, might not perceive the value of the gift the gods had vouchsafed to him in Maria; and the fact betrayed itself in not only the increased warmth and unconstraint of his manner to Hester, but even in his own general health and spirits. He could now once more look upon his beloved Medbury with the old eyes; if the pride of possession had departed from them, it was a satisfaction to him to reflect that the home of his fathers and all the broad lands which it commanded would one day revert to his son, and no longer hampered by debt and mortgage. The contemplation of the happiness

she had thus diffused, though it could not heal Hester's wound—for it was deep and grave—went some way to mitigate it; her position was in some respects like that of one who has become the 'bride of heaven,' but without the self-consciousness that makes the nun; she loved good works and pursued them for their own sake, but they had an attraction for her unknown to the true *religieuse*; they helped her to forget that she would never be the bride of man.

One afternoon in the late autumn, as she was sitting in her own little room writing that fortnightly letter to nurse Arkell which she never omitted, and which formed the greatest enjoyment of that faithful retainer's life, there came a light tap at her door, and Maria entered radiant.

'My darling Hester,' she said, her low sweet voice trembling with joy, 'I have got something to tell you which I am sure will give you pleasure; not even mamma knows it yet; I

hope it is not wrong to make you my first confidante, but you have always sympathised so with me in everything, that my secret does not seem to be half a secret till it is shared with you. I am not sure, by-the-bye, whether that is an epigram or an Irish bull, but I hardly know what I am saying.'

Anything more different from the Maria Barton of yesterday, or of an hour ago, yet with the same face and features, it was difficult to imagine. The expression of her face was wholly changed; where had been gravity there was gladness, where had been serene content was transport. One look at her had told her cousin the secret of which the revelation, as she flattered herself, was yet to come. Yet who would have robbed her of the pride and pleasure of revealing it? As half the delight of a child in her birthday present consists in cutting the strings and opening the parcel in which it is enclosed, in the presence of those she loves, so it is with a young girl's tale of her

first love; half the joy lies in the telling of it to sympathetic ears. Hester rose with a sinking heart and a smiling face. It is a trial for the best of us when in trouble and poverty to learn the sudden prosperity of our friends; we are glad for their sakes, let the cynic say what he will—unless indeed we are of the same (diseased) kidney as himself—but the sense of contrast jars upon us. What have we done, and what have they done, that the fates should award us such different lots? But in Hester's case there was far more than mere sad comparison. Her cousin's gain was her own loss; the very cause of her happiness was the failure and extinction of her hopes; her wealth arose from her own bankruptcy; she was unconsciously glorying in having deprived her of her all.

'What is it, love?'

Only four words; but there have been occasions when one has wrecked a human life for ever; only a question that needed no reply; yet what a pang it cost her!

'Hester, darling, he has proposed to me;

the wish of my heart has been accomplished. I confided it to you, you remember, months ago, in London, or rather you guessed it for yourself, but it then seemed too much good fortune for me that it should come to pass. There are so many other girls better than I.'

'No.' There she could be honest at least. If goodness were desert, Maria Barton's claim was paramount and undisputable.

'But I say yes; much better, cleverer, fairer. He might have made a better and a wiser choice. I was almost jealous of yourself, for instance, till you put my foolish heart at rest. Indeed, now that it is settled, Hester dear, and I am blessed beyond my dreams of happiness, I may tell you that I have been tortured with groundless apprehensions. I suppose men are different from us women in these matters, and I know that Frank has always loved me, for he tells me so.—You are shivering, darling; why do you not have a fire this wet day?'

'No, no; I am not cold. Go on, dearest, I am listening.'

'Well, of course I believe him; but I have had my days of doubt. At one time indeed all seemed to go so smoothly, just as it has done of late; he was never very demonstrative, that is not Frank's way, you know—I call him Frank "for love and euphony," as Clough puts it, and I think it pleases him—but I did think in time that his liking for me would grow to love. And then—and then—I don't know why or when—but it was about the time when you came, his manner seemed to change and become distant. That made me wretched, Hester, and full of dreadful fancies, as you know.'

'I remember; yes.' Hester's words were dragged out as if by some mechanical force within her which she half unconsciously put in motion. She knew that she was saying something, but she knew not what it was. Yet Maria, so sympathetic and solicitous about the

feelings of others, noticed nothing of this; she was in the seventh heaven, too far off to see it.

'How long it lasted I cannot tell; it seemed an age, and then by slow degrees his old manner came back again; and then his liking, and to-day, within this very hour, Hester, he has declared his love.' She opened her arms in expectation of her cousin's caress, and not in vain. Hester clasped her to her bosom with closed eyes lest they should tell her pitiful story, nay, fearful lest the very beating of her wounded heart should reveal it.

'You ought to be a happy girl,' she murmured.

'I am, I am, Hester, oh, *so* happy! I know dear mamma will be pleased, though we have not many confidences between us. Indeed she seems more confidential with you than with me; but I am not jealous of that, dear; on the contrary, I am delighted to see it. What a happy family we shall all be, shall we not? Frank looks upon you, I am sure, as

quite one of ourselves; and now you will be a sort of sister to him.'

'Yes.'

There was an old punishment called 'the question,' in which heavy weights were placed upon the victim, who, if he remained obstinately dumb, was pressed to death. It seemed to Hester that her words were wrung from her by some similar torture.

'One more kiss, dear, and then I must go to mamma. After that, Frank says I must accompany him to the cottage and see Sir Reginald, who, he assures me, will be delighted to welcome me as his daughter that is to be. How kind and good it is of him to be so easily satisfied! If love can make a good wife, as I shall tell him—but I hear mamma calling for me. It is not right that I should keep this good news from her any longer. Good-bye, darling, good-bye.'

She tripped off as though, like Mercury, her neat ankles were furnished with wings.

Hester sank into a chair and gazed out at the window. It was a wet autumnal day; the rain and the leaves were falling; the sky was dark and lowering; the wind from the firs behind the Castle made monotonous moan: it seemed like the dirge of her hopes.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MRS. BERTRAM.

THOUGH Maria's engagement to Captain Drake took place early in November, it was arranged that their marriage should be deferred till the spring. The delay was principally owing to Sir Abraham; he had never encouraged the Captain's addresses to his daughter, though he had not opposed them; it was his private opinion that Maria might have done a great deal better for herself, and also for him. It was true that he would thus attach to himself so much of the Drake interest as was independent of strong party feeling. No voter who had a respect for the family would go against the Captain's father-in-law, unless he was a vehement Tory; and in Shingleton, as in all

small constituencies, personal considerations were more powerful than political views. But the young man was penniless, and would at best be but a baronet, whereas Maria, if she had played her cards well, might with the trumps she held have won a much higher stake in the game of matrimony. In this matter, however, he had been overborne by his wife from the first, and having tacitly submitted to her views could hardly refuse his consent to a proposition which had been so long a foregone conclusion. It was less by way of protest, therefore, than to exhibit his independence, and also to keep his daughter with him as long as possible, that Sir Abraham stickled for 'time.' To this plan Lady Barton vehemently opposed herself, but for once in vain. The usual arguments against a long engagement could hardly apply to one of six months, while that very forcible one founded upon the proverb about the slip between the cup and the lip was denied her. It could not in decency be urged, nor

indeed had she any apprehension in that direction; her chief solicitude—of which it was still more impossible to speak—was to spare Hester so prolonged an ordeal. She judged that if once the Captain were married and settled, her niece would succumb to the inevitable, and think no more about him even in the way of regret; whereas to see him paying his addresses to her cousin, under her very eyes, must needs be a distressing spectacle.

Unhappily her plea for a speedy union was not seconded by the young people themselves, or Sir Abraham might have given way. The Captain showed himself by no means an impatient lover, while the assurance of his affection would have contented Maria even though a still later date had been fixed upon for her becoming his bride. There was very little of that demonstrativeness between them which in engaged young persons is so aggravating to (unengaged) beholders. The only difference that could be perceived in Maria's behaviour

was that she stayed at home, or in its neighbourhood, more than had been her wont, and that some of her charities (none of which we may be sure were intermitted) were done by deputy. That deputy was Hester, and a very willing one she was. In a few months her face was as well known in Shingleton, and almost as welcome, as that of her cousin. Even Captain Paul, of the *Javelin*, who prided himself, when in liquor, upon his independence of character, and had been known to pass by Lady Barton herself with his sou'-wester held ostentatiously tight to his head, veiled his crest (to the extent of touching it) when he met Hester Darrell. The little Fortescues hailed her visit to their new and palatial residence with joyous shouts; and Janet Parkes pronounced her as a reader superior to even that of 'the minister' of the new congregation to which she belonged. It was not much of a compliment, for his voice was nasal, but Hester was unaware of the fact, and in any case would

have been pleased with the commendation. To find one's self useful and beloved is a source of consolation to those who have heavier woes even than she had.

The only two of her cousin's clients, in short, with whom she found a difficulty in getting on were Miss Nicobar and Mrs. Bertram. The former lady was always putting questions which, in any case, would have been impertinent, but which under the circumstances were very embarrassing to her, respecting the family at Medbury. 'How was that love affair between the Captain and Miss Maria getting on? It was thought by some people that there was some hitch about it, since the wedding did not come off. And was it true that the young couple were to live at the Castle to save the Captain house rent?'

It was as much a charity to spend an hour with Miss Nicobar, who, if she had begun with being a hypochondriac was by this time a confirmed invalid, as to distribute alms among the

poor, but it cost the visitor a great deal more. Lady Bountiful, with her blankets, has an easy task, but it is one of the great stumbling-blocks to a life of good works, that the people we seek to benefit, though within reach of our help, are often beyond the range of our sympathies. Gratitude may be dispensed with (indeed, however acceptable, it ought never to be looked for, for that is to expect payment for what we profess to give), ungraciousness may be excused or ignored, but persistent moroseness and misconstruction are difficult to deal with, and demand a patience and forbearance with which only a few of us are endowed. Miss Nicobar was certainly a great trial to Hester, nevertheless, since she saw that her visits gave pleasure to the old lady, she continued them. It is only very few of us that can make people better than we find them, but it is almost always possible to make them happier.

Hester's experiences with Mrs. Bertram were of even a more objectionable kind because

they were of a personal nature. Sometimes that lady would receive her with enthusiasm, if such a term can be applied to one in whom the light of life burnt so low, for this always happened on what she called her 'bad days,' when it almost seemed to the girl that every visit would be her last. But on occasions when the invalid had had a good night, or felt herself a little stronger, her manner was often strange, antagonistic, resentful, and altogether inexplicable.

'You think I am a dying woman, Miss Darrell,' she would say, 'but I am not dead yet. It is often the creaking door that hangs the longest.'

'Indeed, Mrs. Bertram, I think nothing of the kind,' Hester would reply; 'no one except a doctor is in a position to judge of such matters. I most sincerely hope that you may get better, and that life may be less of a burthen to you.'

'You do, do you?' would be the doubting rejoinder; 'well, perhaps that may be so, but

it is not so with some persons I could mention. If wishing could kill me, I should have died twenty years ago.'

'I cannot imagine,' Hester would answer gently, 'that anybody could be so wicked as to wish that, nor any reason for their doing so.'

Then Mrs. Bertram would say, 'Ah! but it is so,' and shake her head significantly, and stare at Hester in a way that disconcerted her exceedingly, and make her almost doubt the sanity of the sick woman. It was impossible to put down such remarks to the mere irritability of disease.

One day Hester found the invalid in a curiously excited state. She seemed stronger and better than she had yet seen her, and was sitting propped up with pillows on the sofa instead of supine as usual. The rain and wind beat heavily upon the window, against which, too, the spray was carried from the stormy sea, but her voice, which, though strangely harsh for a woman of her delicate appearance, was

generally low and broken, could now be heard distinct and clear above the din of the elements.

'So you are come to see me, are you, notwithstanding the bad weather!' observed Mrs. Bertram. The greeting was civil enough, but the tone in which it was conveyed was sarcastic and almost snarling; the look, too, with which she regarded her visitor was anything but friendly, and full of suspicion.

'I do not mind the weather, Mrs. Bertram,' answered Hester quietly, 'nor, indeed, does my cousin Maria, who would, she bade me say, have accompanied me but that an engagement had been made for her by Lady Barton.'

'Oh, we all know that,' interrupted the other with an ill-natured chuckle, 'we all know that it was made for her by her mother, but at the same time she was very willing, whatever the poor man might have been. It is my belief that you young women think of nothing in the

world but marriage, yet there's plenty of other things in it; there's death for one.'

'Ah! there is; you need not tell me that,' returned Hester with a sigh.

'*I* need not tell you! You mean, I suppose, that to look at me is enough. I seem to be half in the grave already, do I? But don't you make too sure. There's many a healthy woman and man too that'll die before I do. Look at that sea yonder: how many vessels will founder, how many strong men be swallowed up, think you, while we shall be sitting here just as usual? Don't you be too sure, young lady; don't you be too sure.'

Hester stood amazed; her experience of life had greatly expanded during the last six months, and had given her, amongst other things, presence of mind; as to feeling angry with the sick and unhappy, she would have been as likely to fly in a passion (as, indeed, many persons of condition do) because the sun

was not shining, or it was wet under foot; but, nevertheless, she was shocked and astounded.

'The issues of life and death are in stronger hands than ours, Mrs. Bertram,' she answered gravely, 'and I, for one, have never presumed to anticipate them.'

'Anticipate? No, I don't suppose you would murder me, but you have made your calculations beforehand. "She has but a little time to live," you have said to yourself, "nobody shall say I did not do my duty by her, and I shall get praise for it from the lips where praise is sweetest." You don't come here to see the end of a miserable woman like me for nothing, it isn't likely.'

'I have no other object, Mrs. Bertram, in coming here, save to do you what little service lies in my power,' said Hester soothingly. 'What other object can I have?'

'Do you want me to tell you? Do you dare to ask me to put it into words?' returned the other with scornful vehemence. 'Now an-

swer me this; I shall tell by your face whether you are telling me a lie or not. Are you not in love with a man who cannot marry you? You *are*, you *are*.'

Hester had turned scarlet, which her interlocutor had probably set down to the consciousness of guilt.

'I knew I was right!' she cried triumphantly.

'You are *not* right, and it is *not* true,' returned the girl with indignant emphasis; 'and if it were true, you have no right to taunt me with it.'

'Not true?' continued the other, without taking notice of the latter part of the reply. 'It is true, at all events, that a man who cannot marry you is in love with *you*. Come, do you dare to tell me, upon your Bible oath, that it is not so? Has he not told you as much, yes, within the last six months, and would he not have married you but for the existence of another woman? Answer me that.'

'I will not answer you,' replied Hester, greatly agitated. 'I deny your right to put any such question, Mrs. Bertram.'

'My right? What? Am I dead and gone already then? You shameless girl!'

'Hush, hush!' interposed a masculine voice, firm and decisive, but at the same time pitched in the key that befits a sick-room. 'Be so good as to go downstairs, Miss Darrell; I will be with you in five minutes.'

It was Mr. Jones, the doctor, at whose appearance the patient muttered some inarticulate words of dissatisfaction, and with flushed face sank back upon her pillow, while Hester, nothing loath, betook herself to the parlour downstairs. There she waited in great distress and perplexity; it was not for the first time, as has been said, that Mrs. Bertram had annoyed her by something like personal reflections, but on this occasion it was impossible to disguise the fact that a deliberate insult had been intended. It would seem that her relations with

Captain Drake had been somehow the cause of this outburst on the part of the sick woman, but how they could possibly have come to her knowledge, or why they should have thus moved her if they had, was inexplicable.

Presently Mr. Jones came down with a grave face.

'I am afraid you have been very much put about by my unfortunate patient, Miss Darrell.'

'Her behaviour was certainly very extraordinary,' said Hester, flushing with the remembrance that the doctor must needs have heard the last words ('You shameless girl!') that had been applied to her. 'Is it possible that the poor woman's brain is affected?'

'Very much,' was the unexpected reply; 'I am glad that you did not recognise her true condition, since it would only have added to your distress of mind. You know what I told you some months ago, that if she should ever again give way to her constitutional temptation

—for that's what it comes to after all—it would probably be the death of her.'

'Do you mean to say that she is intoxicated?' inquired Hester with a shudder.

'"Intoxicated" is not the word, my dear young lady,' returned the doctor drily, 'she is very drunk; I knew it the instant I caught sight of her. I have just found this bottle of brandy under her pillow; you must not take any more notice of anything she may have said to you than if it had been the ravings of a lunatic.'

'Poor woman!' sighed Hester pitifully.

'That's right,' exclaimed the doctor approvingly; 'most people, even good people like Mrs. Purcell, would have said "poor wretch." She's one of Eve's family after all, and, as I have said, it's constitutional. That's what I can't make the Rector understand when some of his parishioners use bad language: use is second nature, and it has become their mother tongue; of course it was very wrong

to acquire the habit (though there's something to be said even for that upon the ground of a limited vocabulary), but when it *is* acquired it becomes mechanical. Now, my dear Miss Darrell, it is clear to me that you are a good deal shaken, and before you go home I would recommend you, professionally, to take just the least drop of brandy. She has left some in the bottle.'

Hester's gesture of disinclination, and even of disgust, was so significant that the doctor did not insist upon his recipe, but he did lay stress upon the necessity of her going home at once, and, since it was still raining heavily, he called a fly and put her into it with his own hands.

By the time Hester reached Medbury she had, as she fancied, 'got over' the unpleasantness to which she had been exposed, and had no intention of saying anything about it. Her relations, indeed, with her Shingleton friends were always a private matter between Maria

and herself, while there was a reason in the present case why she should keep silence upon it even to her cousin. When young ladies are engaged to be married, and the beloved object is at hand, they are wont to be blind to most things that are going on around them, whatever interest they would otherwise have been inclined to take in them. Fortunately for the world at large this is with most of them but a transition stage, and indeed there have been instances after marriage where the average, as it were, of general interest, is restored by their putting their husbands in the background of their consideration, and everyone else before them. Maria, however, though devoted to her swain, had eyes as keen as ever for the trouble of those she loved.

'I am sure something has distressed you to-day, dear,' were the first words she uttered on finding herself alone with her cousin. 'Is the poor girl worse at the Keep?'

'On the contrary, she seems quite marvel-

lously better. It is nothing of that kind at all,' said Hester, forcing a smile.

'Then it is the Nicobar fever. I used to suffer from it myself at one time. The poor lady is certainly a trial, and Heppy—one really gets quite hopeless about Heppy.'

'No, it is not Miss Nicobar; it was Mrs. Bertram.'

Maria's face suddenly grew very grave. 'You don't mean to say that that unfortunate woman has again given way to her temptation? I must go and see her at once.'

'It would be useless, Maria, I am sure; and even worse than useless to do so just now,' said Hester earnestly.

The assertion was but the simple truth, for Dr. Jones had prescribed to his patient perfect rest and quiet; but what made Hester so urgent on the point was that Mrs. Bertram might, in her still excited state, address her cousin as she had addressed herself, and upon the same topic. It would be terrible indeed if

from the ravings of this poor creature Maria should suspect a secret, the knowledge of which might affect the happiness of her whole future life.

'But I must go, Hester,' said Maria resolutely; she was already moving towards the door. 'I am used to these sad scenes, and they won't distress me as they do you. Don't you remember that the doctor warned us that if she relapsed again—why even now I may be too late!' She was gone in a moment, and Hester knew that any attempt to stop her would be in vain, for duty called her. Even if she had known beforehand that her future happiness depended on her avoiding that death-bed beyond all death-beds, she would still have gone all the same. Had any thought of self occurred to her she would have trodden it underfoot at once, as though it were a thought of evil. She had said that such scenes did not distress her. They did, indeed, wring her heart with pity, but they did not, in

homely phrase, 'upset' her, and, what to Hester seemed still more enviable, they left her faith as firm, her hope as bright as ever. It is very easy for what are called orthodox people, who have often little solicitude for others, to contemplate the sorrows of their fellow-creatures, and even, with tolerable equanimity, to see them pass away in their sins. The riddle of the earth never troubles them in the present, and they regard the future with faith, as they call it, but which is, in fact, a mere confidence in their own security. Even to good people the knowledge of the wrongs and woes and weaknesses of their fellow-creatures has, with respect to their spiritual views, much the same effect as though they were their own.

'Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,' as the most poetic of poets puts it, 'stains the white radiance of eternity' for them.

The medical profession, for example, which sees the most of human life, though the kindest and noblest of all callings, is, spiritually speak-

ing, the most cynical. The traveller in distant lands who has given his attention less to antiquities than to humanity is almost always a pessimist. It is indeed difficult for a generous spirit to contemplate the miseries of poor humanity without a certain impatient indignation, which questions the decrees and aims of Providence itself. There are only, in fact, very few spiritual natures which can bear familiarity with sin and suffering without losing something of heart and hope; but that of Maria Barton was one of them. She had not only the gift of Faith, which is common enough, but that of Charity, which is much rarer.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A SUMMONS.

HESTER waited throughout the wet afternoon for her cousin's return to Medbury with great anxiety and perturbation, not so much upon the woman's account to whom she had been summoned (though disquiet at Mrs. Bertram's behaviour had long given place to commiseration for her) as on that of Maria herself.

There was some hope, of course, that the invalid's mood had changed, or that her excitement would have worn itself out before Maria's arrival, but there was also a fear that she might rave on in the same vein, and by some vague allusion to Captain Drake, or to Hester herself, might do irreparable mischief. As hour after hour went by, this foreboding

deepened. When dinner-time arrived, and still her cousin had not returned, she began to feel seriously alarmed. Her apprehensions were not shared by the rest of the household. It was by no means uncommon—though it had not happened so often since her engagement—for Maria to remain at Shingleton till quite a late hour, when any pressing case seemed to demand attention. No one ever thought of interfering with her charitable proceedings; she was a chartered philanthropist. On such occasions, though 'the dangers of the dark' were small in that unfrequented neighbourhood, she would take a fly instead of returning home on foot.

At the beginning of dinner, indeed, Captain Drake had suggested the propriety of his going to fetch his *fiancée* by reason of the fury of the storm, but Lady Barton had reasonably remarked that her daughter was not coming home by water, so that the state of the weather could hardly affect her; and Sir Abraham

(who liked his meals in peace, without defection or interruption) had inquired scornfully whether the Captain thought Maria made of sugar. It was an opportunity for him, as an engaged man, to have made an appropriate reply, but he let it pass and simply took his place at the table. His love, of course, was not platonic, but it seemed to have a good deal of philosophy about it. That sort of passion is common enough nowadays, when, instead of falling in love, we go into it with much the same deliberation that we go into business, but Francis Drake was not of the modern type, which made such behaviour in him the more remarkable. It was the first time that Hester had dined in his company without Maria. He neither addressed her nor glanced towards her; never very talkative, he remained altogether taciturn.

'Really, my dear Captain, since you are off duty,' said Sir Abraham with a bantering air, 'I think you might give us a word or two;

when Maria is here, of course no one expects it.'

'I should as soon think of expecting it of him as of the man at the wheel on shipboard,' observed Sir Reginald gaily.

'By-the-bye, that reminds me, Eleanor,' said Sir Abraham, 'that I have received an invitation from the steamboat committee to take part in the Inauguration Excursion, as they call it, to Saltby. Of course I don't mean to go.'

'I should recommend you to reconsider that determination,' said Lady Barton gravely; 'your refusal is likely to give great dissatisfaction.'

'Pooh, pooh! I will send them ten pounds.'

'I conclude,' said Francis, 'that they have got a new ship.'

The Captain's taciturnity had been complained of, but his first speech as it happened was more objectionable to his host than his silence.

'New ship! Stuff and nonsense! Why should they have a new ship?' inquired Sir Abraham testily.

'I merely judged by the term "inauguration."'

'That only means that it is the first excursion of the season,' explained Lady Barton.

'It's the old *Javelin*,' murmured Sir Reginald. 'I remember it as long as I remember anything. Shouldn't wonder if it was the first steamer that ever was launched!'

'They built them very well in those days,' remarked Sir Abraham; 'there was no scamp work.'

'Still, things must wear out. I was not badly built myself,' said the Baronet pathetically; 'but I feel that it is getting time that Francis took my place.'

'I hope that will not be yet awhile,' said the Captain gently.

'Of course it will not,' cried Sir Abraham confidently. He had no objection, but rather

the contrary, to the Captain becoming Sir Francis, but his own age approached too nearly to that of Sir Reginald to make such views agreeable to him. 'The *Javelin* will at all events last another season, and then, if the general election comes on, and I find myself still M.P. for Shingleton, I suppose I must help the town to buy another ship.'

'If your constituents are not all drowned in the meantime,' suggested the Baronet with a chuckle.

'Since you have opposed the purchase of a new vessel,' said Lady Barton gravely, 'I think you ought to accept the invitation of the committee, if only to show your confidence in the *Javelin*.'

'I hate the sea,' returned Sir Abraham irritably; 'it's ten to one that I shall not be able to keep on deck, and going below is detestable. How people can go for pleasure across the Atlantic to be sick in a

cupboard, often in company with some stranger——'

'Really, Sir Abraham, these observations are quite unnecessary,' remonstrated her ladyship; 'you are not required to go to America, but merely to Saltby and back; and if you object to the cabin we will take the carriage and we can sit in that on deck. Then you need never know that you are on board ship at all.'

Sir Abraham shook his head; he knew better than that, but yet there was a tremulousness in the shake that augured ill for his determination. His wife's arguments had had their usual weight with him, especially that allusion to the representation of the borough. Parties were very nearly balanced there, and his acceptance or refusal of the committee's invitation might seriously affect the chances of his return. Lady Barton perceived the impression that had been made, and was much too wise to pursue the subject. It is always

dangerous to beat the nail of conviction into the unwilling mind, where one injudicious stroke may crook it; once put into position it should be left to settle by its own weight.

In the silence which followed the success of her ladyship's successful stroke of diplomacy the front door was heard to bang; the wind had forced it from the hands of the footman, and thus announced in its rude way an arrival.

'There is Maria at last. Pray excuse me, Lady Barton,' exclaimed Hester involuntarily, and she ran out to greet her cousin.

It struck her that she might have something to say to her of a private nature, and that the presence of others might embarrass Maria. To her astonishment she found that her cousin was not alone, but was accompanied by Dr. Purcell, the Rector of Shingleton. With this gentleman Hester had, of course, made acquaintance. His wife and he had dined more than once at the Castle since she

had been an inmate of it, and she had also occasionally met him in her ministrations amongst the poor. They had seemed to her a harmless but not very interesting old couple. The Rector had held the living from the time when Shingleton had been a mere fishing village, and had made no effort to adapt himself to its new conditions. There were other and larger churches in the place for those who liked Catholic teaching or Gospel truth, but the parish church was still neither high nor low, while its minister remained one of the most old-fashioned of British divines.

On the first Sunday that Hester had attended worship there she had witnessed a ceremony—for though not in the rubric, it might almost have been termed so from the solemnity and seriousness with which it was conducted—that had very nearly upset her gravity. As the Rector was ascending the pulpit stairs, he suddenly stopped, and put his hand to what, had he been in lay costume,

would have been his jacket. Having his gown on—he never preached in his surplice—he found that entrance was denied him. He leant over the banisters, beneath which was the rectorial pew, and in low but distinct tones observed, 'My dear, a pocket-handkerchief.' Mrs. Purcell produced the required article from her reticule, and handed it to him. He then ascended into the pulpit, where he made use of it in a very pronounced and demonstrative manner, then folded it up into a ball, and cast it, with an aim so unerring that it could obviously only have arisen from long practice, into his lady's lap. Then he proceeded, as if nothing had happened out of the common, to give out the text.

This piece of pantomime, independent of the ordeal to which it had subjected her in the difficulty of keeping her countenance, had rather prejudiced Hester against the Rector. It had struck her as irreverent, whereas a more devout and faithful divine according to his

lights did not exist. It was simply that his ways were those of a minister of half a century ago. His charities were boundless, and by the poorer members of his flock he was as much respected as he was beloved; but it must be admitted that his ministrations among the sick were not of the kind to find favour with ecclesiastics of the present day. He was one of those who have been described as finding Mesopotamia a 'very comfortable word,' and thought no part of Holy Scripture more adapted for religious consolation than the description of the creation of the world. At the same time he had a notion that information on current topics was an excellent thing to dispense among the poor, and after reading a chapter of Genesis to a sick man he would often present him with a copy of the daily paper. As the Rev. Cruciform Pyx, the incumbent of St. Ethelburga, was wont to satirically observe of his brother-divine, Dr. Purcell 'dismissed his parishioners with

the earliest and the latest intelligence procurable.'

Any one, indeed, less like a Rector, as that personage is understood nowadays, and much less a Doctor of Divinity, as he had for some unknown cause and in some almost prehistoric time been made, than Dr. Purcell, it would be difficult to imagine any clergyman to be; and that circumstance, though it in no way interfered with his usefulness in his own parish, where he was known to every man, woman, and child, did certainly tend to produce an unfavourable effect upon a stranger. Moreover, what caused even persons superior to superficial impressions to regard the Rector with dislike was that he was hen-pecked. A hen-pecked husband, a man in unbecoming and slavish subjection to his wife, is not only a contemptible object, but to those who know human nature is almost always more or less of an evil-doer. There are generally very good reasons, not at all to his credit, why his spouse

should have obtained an undue advantage over him, and in the case of a clergyman he naturally suffers more in men's good opinion than another. The Rector's meekness, besides the rough marital treatment to which he was subjected, was set down to his consciousness of deserving it, whereas it only came from the exceeding gentleness of his disposition. He allowed himself to be metaphorically whipped and put in a corner, not because he was a bad boy, but because it soothed the morbid irritability of his spouse to inflict upon him these punishments and degradations; instead of being a domestic criminal he was, in fact, a domestic martyr.

Mrs. Purcell was a prey to neuralgia and other nervous disorders, concerning which various remedies had been prescribed by the faculty in vain, but it was agreed on all hands that she was to be crossed in nothing, and to have her own way; and though her maladies were not a whit the better for such treatment,

she had persevered in it throughout her married life, with her husband's approbation and assistance. It is difficult for any human creature to ward off disappointment from their dear ones and to cause everything to happen to them as they please, but so far as good Dr. Purcell could insure these advantages to the wife of his bosom, no matter at what self-sacrifice, or, to say truth, at what self-humiliation, he did so. The result was that, though popular among the poor, the Rector of Shingleton was not thought very highly of among his wealthier neighbours. They beheld the fetters of his matrimonial slavery, but could not understand that he hugged the chain for its own sake. They heard the lash whistling round his ears, but could not conceive (what was indeed the truth) that it was music to him. Sir Abraham indulged himself in many a sly joke at the Rector's expense on this account, and in graver moments expressed himself amazed at his folly. He could not understand,

he said, how a man could become the mere mouthpiece of his wife, and be led like a pig with a wedding-ring through his nose.

Lady Barton despised him not so much for that reason as because she disliked his tyrant, for Mrs. Purcell, though she had weak nerves, had strong opinions, which were not in accordance with those of her ladyship. Though of Tory sentiments, she by no means approved of those feudal times when the chaplain was placed below the salt, and as the Rector's wife was inclined to hold her own as respected social position even with the wife of the sitting member for the borough. It was no wonder, therefore, that Lady Barton was wont to bestow her commiseration on Dr. Purcell, and to speak of him as 'that poor man.'

It need scarcely be said that Maria Barton was not one of those who either openly or in secret entertained contempt for the Rector. It was doubtful whether she experienced that feeling towards any human being; and in the

case of one of the age and sacred calling of Dr. Purcell such a sentiment was out of the question; but their characters were so opposed, and their views of their respective duties so utterly at variance, that sympathy between them was impossible. If they worked together for good in Shingleton it was certainly upon wholly different lines. It was therefore with great astonishment that Hester now beheld the Rector and her cousin in company. Maria's face was grave, but had none of that distress in it which her apprehensions with respect to Mrs. Bertram had led her to fear. 'You are the very person, dear Hester,' she said, 'whom we have come to seek, as Dr. Purcell will tell you.'

'Yes, my dear young lady,' put in the divine nervously, 'I have come at Miss Barton's earnest entreaty to fetch you.'

'It is not, however, upon *my* business,' observed Maria with a smile. The fact was the Rector had been pressed by Maria into

Hester's service as her escort back to Shingleton, and he wished that to be distinctly understood in case Mrs. Purcell might have anything to say—which was more than probable—on the matter. She disapproved of the Rector having any communication with the Castle that was not absolutely necessary, and she was not likely to think more favourably of it because a young and pretty girl had been her husband's companion to and fro.

'It is Mrs. Bertram, who has been taken very ill, that wishes to see you,' explained the Rector; 'and if you've had your dinner, and you wouldn't mind, we'll go back at once.' Here he pulled out his watch, and, under pretence of consulting it, made a mental calculation as to whether he could get home at an hour which would not be so late as to demand investigation. 'Would it were supper-time and all were well!' was his unconscious quotation.

'I am ready this instant,' replied Hester decisively. 'My cloak and hood are here.'

She put them on as she spoke, while Maria tied a scarf about her neck. 'I would go back with you myself, dear,' she whispered, 'but Mrs. Bertram made it an express stipulation that she should see you alone.'

The next moment the Rector had hurried Hester into the fly, and they were making their way, as well as might be, in the teeth of the storm to Shingleton. The roaring of the wind was such as to make communication almost impossible, and her companion contented himself with nodding and smiling at her in an encouraging and paternal manner.

If it should be necessary for him to repeat his whole conversation to the young lady when he got home it would not be a difficult task.

'It is a bad night,' he had said when they got into the fly, and 'I hope you won't catch cold,' at their journey's end.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AN APPEAL.

THE Rector remained downstairs while Hester was ushered into Mrs. Bertram's bedroom.

She saw at once that a great change had taken place in the patient since she parted from her in the morning. Her face had lost its flush, and looked very pinched and pale; her eyes, from which all the glow of excitement had faded out, regarded her with a piteous and penitent gaze.

'How good of you it is, Hester, if I may call you Hester, to come and see me again,' said she in a faint and failing voice, 'after the manner in which I behaved to you only a few hours ago.'

'Do not speak of it,' said Hester gently; 'you were not yourself.' Here she stopped and flushed to her forehead. She had forgotten that that conventional phrase had an application in the present case of a painful nature.

'Nay, I *was* myself,' put in the sick woman bitterly. 'You saw me as I have been for years, a victim to the vice which, until they cast me off, made me a curse to all about me. You see me now at my best—upon my death-bed.'

'I hope not,' murmured Hester softly.

'Why should you hope not?' returned the other. 'Why should you wish a creature such as I am to cumber the earth another hour?' Her tone, notwithstanding her physical weakness, was vehement and full of the bitterest humiliation.

Hester knelt down by the bedside and took one of her worn and shrunken hands in hers.

'You pity me,' murmured the sick woman with a grateful look. 'Indeed what but pity could bring you here? There was a time, not so long ago, when I scorned pity. It is curious how, when all else is lost, we still keep up our pride.' She paused as if in reflection upon some wretched past, and then continued in earnest tones, 'To-day I insulted you; I did so under a misconception, but it is necessary to explain myself. What does it matter, you will say, since I am dying? but that is the very reason. I have made too many enemies in the world to wish to add to their number. I have, also, a still more selfish motive; I was unwilling that when I had gone you should be a witness against me, with one who is in no need of such adverse testimony, whose experience of me already is that of a depraved and worthless woman. I speak of my husband, Philip Langton.'

'Philip Langton! Are you Philip Langton's wife?' exclaimed Hester in amazement.

'Unfortunately for him I am,' was the grave reply. 'Have you never heard him speak of that shameless and abandoned creature who disgraces him in everything but his name?'

'Never.'

'I ought to have known it. His nature is too generous to spurn whatsoever lies at his mercy. What a brute beast I was to suspect him and you of calculating on my death! That is what I did this morning when I accused you of loving some one whom you could not marry. When you did not deny it, I felt convinced of it, and then my temper, and something still more shameful, got the better of me. Forgive a dying woman.'

'There is nothing to forgive,' murmured Hester, deeply moved. How sad and strange it seemed that she should thus be brought face to face with the very being who, as regarded his melancholy and isolation, had made Philip Langton what he was. 'But how have you

learned, since this morning, that Philip Langton has never looked upon me otherwise than as a daughter, nor I on him save as on another father?'

'From Dr. Purcell. He was my husband's truest and oldest friend. It was he who undertook the charge of me—though, alas! who could defend me from myself?—and promised to see that the money provided for my maintenance was duly applied. He is in full possession of your history, and when in my ravings, after your visit this morning, I inveighed against you, he showed how false and infamous were my accusations. He had been sent by Dr. Jones to break some news to me that I had been long expecting, and he brought Miss Barton with him.'

'News about yourself?' inquired Hester hesitatingly.

'Yes. I have only a few days to live at most. Think of that, you who are young and strong and well. To pass into the sunless

land, though it may not be from sunshine, is dreadful even to the saint; what must it be then, think you, to such as I have been?'

'I am very, very sorry,' murmured Hester. The tone was earnest enough, though the words were weak. In the presence of so awful an apprehension what could she say?

'Do you mean that?' inquired Mrs. Bertram eagerly. 'Would you help me even at this eleventh hour if you could?'

'Indeed I would; there is nothing that I would not do to help you.'

'Then entreat my husband to come while I am yet alive, and to say with his own lips one word of farewell. If, being but a mortal, notwithstanding my trespass against him, he can forgive, surely our Eternal Father will look with mercy upon my sins. Oh, Hester, you have influence with Philip Langton! He loves you for your father's sake and for your own; he respects you doubtless all the more because he remembers to what depths one of your own

sex can sink, and contrasts you with her. Oh, use your power with him, and give comfort to a dying woman.'

Hester hesitated. It would be a terrible task to write to the proud and unhappy man about the trouble which he believed to be a secret one; or, if known to a few, known least of all to her. It was a matter most delicate, as well as difficult, for one of her age and sex to deal with.

'You shrink from it, I see,' sighed Mrs. Bertram despairingly. 'It was a painful and unpleasant task, I know, and I had no right to impose it upon you. Forgive me if on the verge of the grave I forgot those scruples——'

'Hush, hush! I will write to him to-morrow; nay, this very night.'

'May Heaven bless you, you dear, good girl; you have brought me the first tears' (she was sobbing like a child) 'that I have shed this many a day.'

The gratitude of her tone was intense, but

not more thrilling than its pathos. Wretched indeed is the poor human heart that has cause to be thankful for a tear.

To remain with the sick woman was only to exhaust her by evoking emotion, so after a reiteration of her promise, Hester left her and repaired to the parlour, where she found the Rector awaiting her, it could not be said without impatience; indeed she came upon him in the very act of consulting his watch.

'I don't think you need see Mrs. Bertram again to-night, Dr. Purcell,' said Hester. 'I have left her much easier in her mind.'

'I thought you would,' returned the Rector sympathetically, taking her hand in his. Hester knew at once that he was aware of what Mrs. Bertram had asked of her, but fortunately it did not strike her that the request might more naturally have been made to the Rector himself. The truth was that Philip Langton, in acting upon Dr. Purcell's advice in placing his wife at Shingleton, had exacted

from him a written promise that no communication from her should ever reach him through his means. He had done his duty, and far more than his duty, to her, but in so doing had washed his hands of her.

'It is rather late,' said the Rector, 'and the fly is waiting for us.'

'But why should I trouble you to come back with me?' said Hester simply.

'Trouble! oh, it's no trouble!' returned the other. 'But the storm does seem to be abating a little, does it not? I don't know what Miss Maria will say though, if I let you go home alone.'

The Rector's face was a study; he was not thinking of Miss Maria, but of what Mrs. Purcell would say when he came to tell her that he had been twice to the Castle that day.

'I don't see how your presence can still the storm, Dr. Purcell,' said Hester, smiling.

'That's true,' said the Rector wistfully; he was thinking of another storm in another

place; 'if you are sure you don't mind going alone. Good night, my dear young lady, good night!'

The gratitude in his face, though he did not express it, was almost as earnest as that of poor Mrs. Bertram had been.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

OVERHEARD.

THE origin of evil is not a thing that can be understood, and far less reasoned away in a hurry. Indeed, in view of the complications and contradictions that may come of controversy on the subject, one may say of it, in homely phrase, that the least said is soonest mended, but it must, nevertheless, be conceded that there are few evils without their complement of good. One may even add that the greater the evil the greater the good (or at all events the benefit that comes out of it to somebody). Full of sorrow as Hester was upon Mrs. Bertram's account, it was an intense satisfaction to her that in this, the unhappy

woman's last hour of need, it lay in her power to assuage it. Moreover, as she had found it before (only this case was a far stronger one), the recollection of her own misfortune was lost sight of in the contemplation of the infinitely greater woe of another. The hope which brightens a maiden's youth was dead within her. Life beckoned her no longer with smiling face and flaming torch, but how far more pitiable was the position of this fellow-creature, full of sin and shame, to whom Death was already holding out his inevitable hand.

Many people have the power of regarding such cases from so high a moral elevation—it seems so impossible that they themselves could have succumbed to such temptation—that they lose sight of their wretchedness; but Hester was very human. Her letter to Philip Langton could scarcely have taken its place in a collection of moral essays; there was no allusion to his wife's wrong-doing, nor to her penitence, all that was taken for granted; it

was the eloquent pleading of a woman for one of her own sex at the point of death, to a generous and noble nature. She had no more doubt of its efficacy than of the morrow's dawn, though the Rector, as we have seen, had despaired of such success attending his own arguments. She knew Philip Langton better than he did, and she had also confidence, not indeed in her influence over him, for that would have implied a vanity from which she was utterly free, but in that affection which had never yet denied her anything, and which she felt would make him unwilling to suffer in her good opinion. What a bathos would be human life if it had its end in this world only! What self-sacrifices do we inflict upon ourselves, as it seems, for nothing, or worse, for utterly unworthy objects! What toil do we suffer to no purpose! What precautions do we take for our dear ones, only to find that fate has smitten them from some unexpected quarter! What tears are shed, nay, what

prayers are uttered to all appearance in vain! It is not too much to say that one-half of our best efforts are to all appearance wasted. Nor is there much consolation in the thought that half of our worst apprehensions are also unfounded; while they last they are as much the cause of misery as though they had been realised. Energy, as science tells us, is never lost, but that is certainly not the case with human endeavour.

Hester's urgent letter crossed in the post one from Philip Langton, announcing his departure upon a continental tour, and omitting for the present to give his address. It was therefore not only 'of no use,' but must needs disclose her knowledge of the unhappy circumstances of his life, which could hardly fail to be disagreeable to him. The dying woman's pleading and her own impassioned argument had been equally thrown away. These are the things which beget the fatalism of the Turk, and cause the science of Life, which is the

diminution of Risk, to be neglected. What does it matter, we are tempted to say, if, though our plans are laid with nicest care, blind Chance steps in and with his heedless hoof effaces all?

Mrs. Bertram lingered on till the next evening, when she expired in Hester's presence with her hand clasped in hers, and clinging to it as though it were the last link of life. Maria had parted from her an hour or so before, leaving her cousin alone with her at the dying woman's own request. It was Hester's first experience of a death-bed, and made a deep impression on her; indeed, though it may seem a contradiction in terms, we know but little of life till we have seen death. What was more to be wondered at, Maria, to whom such spectacles were familiar, seemed almost as much affected by it, though, as her custom was, she hardly even referred to it. There are well-meaning persons who pass much of their time in visiting the sick and dying, and yet

lack the sense of reverence. The details of the last hours of their fellow-creatures form their favourite gossip, and though they do not own it to themselves, they derive a certain morbid satisfaction from them. Under pretence of inducing serious reflection, they make conversational capital out of the very charnel-house, and render life less spiritual by reminding us of its meanest and most material aspects. It was not so with Maria Barton, to whom death and not life seemed fleeting, and who, looking upon each departed one as having exchanged this world for a better, saw no reason for the introduction of gloom in an atmosphere that stands only too much in need of sunshine.

The death of Mrs. Bertram, however, depressed her; one would have thought that the riddle of this painful earth (which, however, had long ceased to trouble her) was weighing upon her in consequence, as it did upon her less experienced cousin; and this was especially apparent in her behaviour to Hester

herself. Her native cheerfulness, which, since her engagement, had almost become high spirits, had sunk again to its own level, and in her relations with Hester, below it. This was an enigma to which the latter had no solution, but something, she never knew what, prevented her from inquiring into it. Maria's affection for her was as demonstrative as ever, but mingled with a certain wistful sadness. She too, it seemed, had some question to ask, which at the same time she shrank from asking.

From the circumstances in which it arose, Hester vaguely guessed that it had some connection with Philip Langton; perhaps Mrs. Bertram had confided to Maria the suspicion she had once entertained concerning Hester and her husband, and had omitted to explain that she had been mistaken; if that was so, it was not possible that Hester should speak first on such a subject; it was also very improbable that Maria, who possessed a delicacy and sensitiveness not always to be found in con-

nection with high principles, should take the initiative in the matter.

In the meantime, the winter melted into spring, and nature, indifferent to human sorrow, put on her freshest and brightest raiment, and in view of the warm and tranquil weather it was arranged that the *Javelin* should make her inaugural expedition some weeks earlier than had been originally proposed. The outward voyage to Saltby took, under favourable circumstances, about four hours, and allowing the same time for the return trip, there was but an hour or two to spare in the place itself, which, however, had no particular attractions; the enjoyment of the trip consisted in the voyage itself, which, accordingly, as one would have imagined, could only have had charms for those who could fairly consider themselves 'good sailors.' So eager, however, is the human mind for excitement, that the consciousness of having on previous occasions succumbed to the influence

of Neptune, by no means deterred the good people of Shingleton from this new venture; and it was understood that a larger contingent than usual would patronise the first trip of the season.

Sir Abraham, as we know, had given in to his wife's arguments upon the subject, and was to accompany her on board in his carriage. Captain Drake and Maria were also to be of the party, but Hester had excused herself at the last moment on the plea of a headache. This is a malady of the fair sex which it is tacitly agreed upon among mankind should not be too closely inquired into. Providence has bestowed it upon them, as it has given the shell to the snail, and the ink to the cuttle-fish, for purposes of self-defence and concealment; it can be assumed at a minute's notice, on the mere suggestion of an unwelcome visit, or a disagreeable proposal, and can be discarded with equal facility. It attacks its victim at the approach of one partner in a ball-

room, and leaves her free (though not always 'fancy free') at the invitation of the next; it is under certain conditions aggravated by the south wind, or even by circumstances of the most perfect repose, while on the other hand it is cured by the roaring east and a brass band (if with special accompaniment) close to the tympanum of the ear. It is so exquisitely sensitive that it has even been known to be affected by the social position of the person who addresses the patient, and, while obstinate to the voice of a commoner, will disappear at the whisper of a lord. The advantages of such a disorder can hardly be overrated, and especially in married life; as a shield and buckler against all propositions which do not recommend themselves to the fair possessor, it is inestimable; a man would be a brute indeed who does not succumb to its plaintive 'Non possumus.'

The fair sex, however, if, as the philosophers tell us, they know themselves even less than

we do, have a tolerably accurate understanding of one another. They say, 'Why have you got a headache, Julia?' just as a man may inquire where his friend is going when he sees him take up his hat and umbrella. Girls that are intimate with one another indulge in this curiosity without stint, and yet Maria Barton did not inquire of Hester why she was indisposed to accompany the rest of the party to Saltby.

Just before they started, Lady Barton called Hester into her own room, which adjoined her boudoir. 'I have asked Sir Reginald to look in to lunch, my dear,' she said, 'to keep you company. You will do the honours a great deal more agreeably to him than I could.' This was probably true, for though her ladyship and the Baronet 'got on together,' as the phrase goes, sufficiently well, they had nothing in common except that purpose which had at last been accomplished so much to their satisfaction, while, on the other hand, Hester was a great

favourite of his. That Lady Barton should have made such an admission, which was, in a manner, one of failure, to her niece, was, however, very significant of their relations to one another. She had, indeed, no secrets from Hester, but reposed in her an entire confidence, while she rejoiced in her little domestic triumphs, the ascendency she had gained in her own way over the Baronet, and the toleration extended to her by Sir Abraham, as though they were her own.

'We shall both be very glad to see you home again, notwithstanding,' observed Hester, smiling. 'I shall feel lost all alone in this great Castle till you return, and Sir Reginald is always lost without his son.'

'You might have come with us, you know, my darling, if you pleased,' said Lady Barton with grave tenderness, and smoothing Hester's hand caressingly. 'It was a very convenient little headache, was it not?'

Hester answered nothing; her lip trembled,

and the hand which her aunt still held in hers was deadly cold.

'Forgive me, my dear, if I seemed to speak lightly,' exclaimed Lady Barton with emotion; 'do not suppose that I am not conscious of what you undergo every day and all day for all our sakes.'

Hester held up her hand; for the moment speech was denied her; her aunt's allusion to her declining to accompany the rest of the party on their excursion was, indeed, most inopportune; she could suffer patiently enough so long as she could persuade herself that her sufferings were unnoticed, but pity was intolerable to her; the expression of it seemed to tear open a wound which, as yet, was far from being healed.

Her dumb request for silence was, however, disregarded or misunderstood; Lady Barton, feeling that she had made a mistake, sought to atone for it by the manifestation of a grateful solicitude.

'I do hope,' she went on, 'that Maria has not unwittingly given you pain by pressing you to come with us.'

'I am thankful to say she has not. It would almost seem that the constant habit of saying and doing what is best for others guides her aright, even in matters of which she has no cognisance.'

'You overestimate my girl's virtues,' said Lady Barton, though the flush of maternal pride in her cheek belied her words. 'It is only that she feels that her relations to Francis makes her an indifferent companion to you. Good heavens, if she only guessed the true state of the case, what tortures would she not suffer upon your account! And to think that she must never know it! That the sacrifice you have made of your love and life can never be acknowledged by her who reaps the benefit of it! The martyr has his crown even in this world, but you, you dear unselfish girl——'

The door of communication between the

two apartments was half open, and, as Lady Barton spoke, there seemed to come through it the rustle of a woman's dress. For a moment she stood still and motionless, as though she had been turned to stone, then with a look of determination and firmness that became her well, she walked rapidly into the next room. It was empty.

'Thank Heaven!' she exclaimed, and the tone in which she spoke betrayed the intense relief which the fact afforded her. 'We were mistaken. There is no one here.'

'But are you quite sure that there *has* been no one?' murmured the trembling girl.

'Yes, the door is closed as I left it, that leads into the corridor.'

'But I thought I heard a door close,' said Hester faintly.

'It must have been your imagination, Hester; still it shall be a warning to me. You have enjoined silence upon me as regarded this topic, and it is my duty to respect your

slightest wish. Forgive me; it shall be the last time that I offend, and, as it happens, there is no harm done.'

Lady Barton dismissed her niece as usual with an affectionate embrace, and rang her bell for her maid to assist her in getting ready for the expedition. As she was performing this office, her mistress asked her in an indifferent tone, 'Did you chance to enter the boudoir, Davis, just before I rang for you?'

'No, my lady,' was the reply, 'but I saw Miss Maria come out of it a few moments ago.'

CHAPTER XL.

THE EMBARKATION.

THERE are certain inks and leads which, on first being applied to paper, impress it, as it seems, slightly enough; but as time goes on the marks become darker, more pronounced, and indelible. So it happens as regards certain events in our memory. At the time of their occurrence we think little of them, and, indeed, they may be intrinsically of no consequence; but from subsequent circumstances they may come to have the deepest interest for us, and abide in our minds to our last hour. This was the case with Hester Darrell, as respected everything that was said by the little party who left the Castle that fair May morning for

their excursion to Saltby. It entailed an absence from home of three-quarters of a day at farthest, and was, therefore, by no means an occasion for any manifestation of feeling; but life at the Castle was so quiet, domestic and void of interest, that the event was a source of considerable excitement and show of leave-taking. It was the first time that Hester had ever shaken hands with the Captain, under conditions the least approaching those of farewell, since they had parted almost as strangers twelve months ago at the Charing Cross Station. How changed, and changed again, had been the whole course of her young life since then; and, above all, what changes had taken place in their mutual relation! In her eyes he was the same as he had ever been, only she was not guilty of coveting the property of another; but though Francis Drake was the same, Hester Darrell had become another being, and could contemplate her old self, as it were, from without, with a

certain pitiful regret, but with resignation, too, as one might contemplate an old acquaintance, dead.

'I hope you will have a pleasant voyage,' she said as he took her hand.

'Thanks; I hope so,' was his quiet rejoinder.

Nothing could be more commonplace than such parting words; but yet in after hours, and read by the light of after events, a deeper meaning came out of them—as letters written in certain compounds start out on a blank page when held before the fire. Hester seemed to herself to have wished him happiness on a far longer journey than that he was about to take, and he on his part in that reply seemed to have recognised her meaning.

Even Sir Abraham's three fingers of farewell (for the world at large he seldom had more than two), and his would-be playful injunction to her to see that the Castle did not run away in his absence, seemed to her (when

all these incidents had become memories) to have had a certain significance. As to Lady Barton, there had been enough and to spare of emotion in the interview between them that morning, and their good-bye was studiously undemonstrative; but the touch of those lips and the close and affectionate pressure of that hand were fated to be felt again upon Hester's brow and palm 'dear as remembered kisses after death.'

The leave-taking, however, which she was destined to remember most vividly, and which afterwards, in its minutest details, became a subject to her of the keenest and tenderest speculation, was that of Maria herself. Even at the time it made no little impression on her. Never, it struck her, had a young girl started on a pleasure errand with the lover of her choice with so grave a face. It could not, indeed, be said to be troubled; serenity was habitual to it. Her feelings were too completely under control and discipline to

admit of the exhibition of personal emotion; but it was serious even to sadness. Those 'homes of silent prayer,' her eyes, had tears in them as she bade her cousin adieu, and in her parting embrace Hester fancied (or so, perhaps, it seemed to her afterwards) that there was an intense, nay, passionate, assurance of affection that it had never had before. Most significant of all, in reply to her cousin's cheerful words of farewell, Maria Barton spoke not a word. Her lips, indeed, moved, and Hester caught a murmur (or that too, it may be, only shaped itself into words on subsequent suggestion) which sounded like 'God help me.' Then she stepped into the carriage and dropped her veil.

These things were like incidents in a drama, fated, quite contrary to expectation, to run for many a night, and of which Hester Darrell was to be the involuntary witness.

Sir Abraham had had some correspondence which delayed their departure considerably beyond the hour agreed upon; but, as he had

observed, with that somewhat crude and rudimentary humour which is the characteristic of his class, his position was like that of the criminal late for execution, who expressed his confidence that matters would not begin before he himself put in an appearance; it was not likely that the *Javelin* would start without the member for the borough.

When the carriage, indeed, drove to the little jetty, which was the place of embarkation, and while it was being slung on the deck by the crane employed for that purpose (with Sir Abraham and his lady inside, to the great delight of all beholders), folks who had not been able to make up their minds to the last moment still continued to join the throng of passengers. It was one of those doubtful days when people who are conscious of not possessing 'good sea legs,' and who yet enjoy a sail in moderate weather, are prone to hesitate, and in most instances are generally lost. This happened, for instance, to Miss Nicobar, to

whom 'a good blow upon the sea' had been recommended by Dr. Jones, but who had shrunk from it until she saw Lady Barton taking her aerial voyage, when the opportunity of having a few words with a lady of title and a member of Parliament, in the presence of so many fellow-creatures, proved too much for her.

The Rector and his wife, too, had also been among the waverers till the arrival of 'the Castle party' had reassured them. 'Until I see Sir Abraham on board with my own eyes,' said Mrs. Purcell, 'I shall not believe that he will risk the life on which he sets such a fancy price on board the old *Javelin*.' She had no great confidence in that ancient vessel, which would certainly not have been classed A1 at Lloyd's, herself; but, on the other hand, she did not wish to leave the patronage of the expedition in the hands of her rival. If Sir Abraham went she had made up her mind that the Rector (notwithstanding that

he suffered very considerably whenever there was the least 'sea on') should go too. Though the undertaking the chaplaincy of the *Javelin* was scarcely within the range of his professional duties, it behoved him to maintain the supremacy of the cloth by land and sea, and whatever was wanting in him in asserting that position—and there was much—she felt bound to supply.

A very masterful woman was Mrs. Purcell; tall of stature, gaunt of frame, and with a very combative expression of countenance; but though feared of men and unpopular with women in her own station of life, she had a large following among the poor; nothing pleased her better than to make them happy and comfortable, so that it was done in her own way; the children in her Sunday-school had plenty of treats, but only on condition of accepting the Church Catechism in its integrity, with a special attention to the ordinance of submitting themselves 'orderly and reverently

to all their betters.' Woe to the boy who omitted to pull his forelock when he passed Mrs. Purcell in the street, or to the girl who bobbed instead of dropped a curtsey. Forelock she could not pull, for not even the authors of 'The Unloveliness of Love-locks' had a greater horror of the vanity of long hair than Mrs. Purcell, and she kept her girls as close cropped as convicts. Their parents were amply provided with coals and blankets throughout the winter, but only on the tacit understanding that they should never enter a Wesleyan chapel, or even so much as linger on Shingleton Green when the voice of the itinerant preacher was polluting the air with his heterodoxy.

Among the excursionists were folks of all ranks and ages; the whole family of Fortescues, for example, 'the cliff-dwellers,' as the Captain had called them, for whom Maria had provided the means of transit; and the sick girl Janet Parkes, who, though looking frailer

than ever, had survived the winter and was now actually about to realise her wish of being in the first trip to Saltby. She was carried on board in her invalid-chair, from which, with hectic cheek and lustrous eyes, she watched everything that took place with eager interest.

Captain Paul, of course, was there also, with a flushed cheek and a voice which, even in its hoarse command, suggested that he had sacrificed to Bacchus instead of Neptune before starting. He had expressed himself in very unparliamentary terms respecting the late arrival of Sir Abraham's carriage, and even when it came did not cease his objurgations, only, instead of making it the particular object of his wrath, he distributed his anathemas in all directions, a circumstance which, while it shocked some few of his audience, impressed the majority with entire confidence, as smacking of good seamanship and the manners of the genuine mariner. To those, indeed, who consider roughness of speech proof of qualifi-

cation in a sailing-master, Captain Paul must have seemed the type of perfection. His squat but burly form, his weather-beaten face, to which drink had given, as it were, the finishing touch, like the varnish on a picture, would have made an admirable representation of the fine old sea-dog at the Surrey, or even at Sadler's Wells, where there is, or was, real water; but, reasoning from after occurrences, it was thought by many that Captain Paul was not a commander to be trusted in, and little more seaworthy than the old *Javelin* herself.

'If that man is drowned,' was the cynical reflection of a stranger to Shingleton, who was watching the departure of the steamer with no little curiosity, 'his fate will be the less surprising, since he is half-seas over already.'

The speaker was one who certainly, under less exciting circumstances, would not have escaped observation; his high-bred air and look of command, quite as striking in his loose

marine attire as it could have been in clothes of the most fashionable cut, were very remarkable, while his long white beard, streaming like a meteor in the rising wind, had a most portentous aspect. He did, indeed, attract the attention of Lady Barton, who, leaning out of the carriage in which she sat by her husband's side, inquired of her daughter whether that tall gentleman on the jetty was not a new arrival at Shingleton.

'I have never seen him before,' was Maria's reply.

If that was the case with her mother, the stranger might well congratulate himself on having made an impression on her, for she watched him with eyes indifferent to all other objects, to the moment when the ropes were cast off, and with a shriek of protest the old *Javelin* turned her reluctant head to the open sea; nay, even when, like some veteran horse who feels the turf beneath him, the old ship began to run before the favouring wind, her

ladyship still, with neck outstretched, kept her gaze on the same object, until her husband peevishly bid her put her window up, so that, without a draught, he might let his down—a precautionary measure which he already felt to be imperatively necessary. And so, watched from the jetty by the unknown visitor through his binocular, and by a crowd of Shingletonians who had lacked either the means or inclination to patronise her, the *Javelin* sped swiftly, if not smoothly, past the headland on her first trip of the season.

Among those left behind was one whose profession insured him against all participation in pleasure-voyages; he had just closed his telescope with a snap, accompanied with a grunt of sardonic satisfaction characteristic of his class, when the stranger addressed him. 'Our friends will have rather a rough passage to Saltby, will they not?'

'They'll have a bit of a tumble, perhaps, a-going there, sir,' replied the sailor, 'though

nothing to hurt, but when they comes back again, in the teeth of what, if I'm not mistaken, is going to be a regular north-easter, it's my opinion that a good many of them will be wishing theirselves at home.'

CHAPTER XLI.

IN THE CHURCHYARD.

After the party had left the Castle, Hester went on foot to the town. Even had there been room in the carriage for her she would have been averse to accompanying them to the jetty, not only because she always avoided the company of the engaged young couple when she could do so without its being remarked upon, but because on this particular occasion she had fancied that Maria was indisposed for her society; the way in which her cousin had shut herself up in her room before her departure, instead of inviting her there for a parting confab, as is the custom of young ladies similarly devoted to one another, and especially her mute good-bye, had again aroused

that suspicion in Hester's mind which Lady Barton had only partially set at rest. Was it possible that Maria had really overheard the conversation between Lady Barton and herself? If so, it was indeed a circumstance sufficient to account for any strangeness in her cousin's manner. The very notion of such a disaster chilled her blood. For if she had heard it, what possibility was there of explaining the matter away to Maria's satisfaction? What could Lady Barton say should her daughter interrogate her upon the subject? and what could Hester herself say if put to the question? The very extremity of the catastrophe, however, seemed to place it beyond the pale of possibility; there are some things too terrible, as there are others too good, 'to be believed;' and, moreover, had such a misfortune taken place, it seemed incredible that Maria, mistress of herself as she was, could have borne herself with such apparent calmness, and have taken

part under any circumstances in an expedition of pleasure.

Nevertheless, Hester experienced a sense of discomfort that was almost one of depression; to stay in the Castle alone seemed impossible for her, so she resolved to go into Shingleton, and employ herself among those whom Lady Barton called 'her unfashionable friends,' till the luncheon hour, at which meal it had been arranged that Sir Reginald should come and keep her company. The Fortescues, as she knew, and Janet Parkes, had joined the party to Saltby, but there were many others by this time in the little town to whom her visits were equally welcome, and in whom she took a lively interest. There was a short cut from Medbury for foot passengers over the hill, which afforded an extensive prospect over land and sea, as well as a bird's-eye view of Shingleton itself; and here, as was her wont, Hester paused a moment, notwithstanding that the

wind was blowing strongly, to contemplate the varied scene.

The waters of the bay, so bright and blue in sunshine, looked dark and cold under the grey sky, while here and there appeared what children call 'white horses,' significant of the growing gale at sea. Under other circumstances, Hester would have had some pity to bestow upon poor Sir Abraham, who, a very indifferent sailor, was probably regretting by this time having given way to his wife's arguments instead of his own inclinations, but her thoughts, though on board the *Javelin*, were not with him. As her eye roved from sea to land it fell upon the little church immediately beneath her, into whose God's acre the footpath descended. It was here, she reflected, that in a few weeks Maria would be married. She pictured to herself the auspicious scene: Sir Reginald so serene and satisfied; Sir Abraham with less cause than he imagined for complacency, but well content; Lady Barton with

no drawback to her self-congratulation save the knowledge of her niece's secret, the keeping of which, however, would henceforth be a less perilous and anxious matter; the bride, as pure and innocent as her own white robe, as happy as she deserved to be; and the bridegroom—no, Hester could not trust herself to regard him thus objectively like the rest, nor would it be well to speculate upon his thoughts. She herself would be there; she *must* be there; as one of her cousin's bridesmaids she would be a witness, almost an assistant, at the ceremony so fatal to her former hopes. Oh, woeful day! would that it had come and gone; for to accept the Inevitable is one thing, but to accept the Accomplished another, and a far easier task.

The town looked, thanks to the contingent it had that morning furnished to the *Javelin*, less populous and more asleep than ever; but, on the other hand, in the churchyard, which, except on Sundays, was usually quite deserted,

was a solitary figure. As Hester drew nearer she fancied it to be that of some one not unfamiliar to her, though attired in an unfamiliar garb. He wore a yachting-suit made of blue serge, but with a broad band of crape upon his arm, indicating some recent domestic loss; this however, though significant enough, would not have enabled Hester to identify him; it was the neighbourhood in which he stood, close to the nameless grave of Mrs. Bertram, that caused her, while she was still some way off, to recognise in him Philip Langton.

The revelation of his presence by no means afforded her the unmixed satisfaction which it would have done some weeks ago. She had not heard a word from him since the letter she had written adjuring him to come and see his dying wife, or in reply to that other she had sent to him afterwards announcing her decease. He had been abroad, she knew, and might not have received either of them until his return, which again might only have occurred the day

before, in which case his silence would have been explicable; but it might also have arisen from displeasure. It was not impossible that he had resented her interference in his domestic affairs as an intrusion, and her appeal to him as an impertinence. The first sight of his face, however, as he caught sight of her, at once did away with that apprehension.

'My dear child,' he cried, holding out both his hands, 'how delighted I am to see you! Yes, it is a sad place to meet at,' he added, noticing her involuntary glance towards the grave, 'but by no means an ill-fitting or inappropriate one, since it reminds me of the heavy debt of gratitude I owe you as regards her who lies beneath yonder mound. I was even now on my way to you to acknowledge it in person. I only arrived from the Continent, where I have been on business, on Saturday, and on getting your most kind letter, started at once for Shingleton, too late, of course, as regarded the matter on which you wrote, but

not too late I hope to rescue myself from your ill opinion.'

'I was sure, quite sure, you would have come earlier if you could,' said Hester earnestly.

'Most certainly I would, dear girl; there was not a word you wrote in which I did not concur, nor an argument of which I did not feel the force. For all you have done for her who lies yonder, dear Hester, I thank you a thousand times, and as if you had done it to myself. There is, by-the-bye, I see, no name upon the headstone.'

He paused, and Hester stammered out, 'I did not know what you would wish to be put there.'

'Let me try to anticipate what you would have had inscribed upon it. That would not be "Sarah Bertram," but, "Sarah, wife of Philip Langton." If she had lost her title to that name in life, death atones for all. She shall resume it. Does that please you?'

'It is like yourself, Mr. Langton, and therefore cannot fail to please me. What is of more consequence, it is the epitaph which she of whom we speak would have preferred above all others. She died with your name upon her lips.'

'Ay, ay,' he sighed, 'so Purcell wrote me. And now to speak of your own affairs, Hester, about which, to say truth, I have been engaged abroad. I am afraid your two thousand pounds are gone. Mr. Digby Mason has been declared a defaulter, and is proved to have been much worse. The best I could do was to open Mrs. Brabazon's eyes to the real character of her hopeful nephew, otherwise he would probably have ruined her, like every one else who gave him the opportunity of doing so.'

'I behaved very ill,' said Hester penitently, 'in withdrawing my confidence from you, Mr. Langton, in that unhappy matter, and it is only just that I should pay the penalty for it.'

'You have nothing to reproach yourself with,' said Langton, smiling, for he was pleased to see she still thought the loss was hers, and not his own; 'none of us are wise at all times, and your position was a very peculiar one, of which none, by-the-bye, but an irredeemable blackguard would have taken advantage. But let us talk of more pleasant things. I am delighted to find that your friends at Medbury, one of whom at least there was reason to suspect would have been "a little more than kin and less than kind," have shown themselves so friendly.'

'They have been kindness itself,' said Hester enthusiastically; 'and she of whom you speak scarcely less so than Maria herself.'

'Indeed!' returned the other thoughtfully; 'I confess that that surprises me: it is a pleasurable disappointment. I knew something of her ladyship when she was a quarter of a century younger, and she did not impress me favourably, and when I beheld her to-day (for

I saw her start with the rest of your party in the steamboat this morning), I said to myself, "That is the same masterful hard woman with the puritanical mask that I so well remember."'

'She is masterful, Mr. Langton, but she is not hard,' said Hester earnestly; 'and even for the appearance of hardness there is an excuse, which you would, I am sure, be the first to admit if I were at liberty to explain the matter. She has been most kind to me. As to Maria, it is impossible for you to imagine what a dear good girl she is.'

'I will take your word for it,' said Mr. Langton, smiling; 'it is not necessary for me to tax my imagination in that way, for I have the honour to be acquainted with a young lady answering to the same description already.'

'I assure you there is no comparison between Maria Barton and the person you have in your mind,' said Hester gravely.

'Well, well, I must be excused for declining to give up my fealty to the one until I have seen the other. I understand, however, she has attractions for the gallant captain in whose company I have just seen her. The son of old Sir Reginald, is he not, who used to live at Medbury? Just so; then now it will return to his family, which is very convenient.'

'I am quite sure,' said Hester, with a little flush, 'that such an idea never influenced Captain Drake in his choice of my cousin; he is far too honourable and high-minded.'

'Then perhaps it was a family arrangement,' persisted Langton slyly.

'Why should you say so? In my judgment there never was a more fortunate bridegroom, or a happier bride than there will be in this case.'

'Then I am altogether wrong, for I confess it struck me this morning that the young lady looked, under the circumstances, anything but on pleasure bent.'

A little word dropped by chance sometimes bears fruit of a wholly different kind than that intended by him who utters it. The truth was that Philip Langton, in his admiration for his ward, had rather resented Captain Drake's preference for Miss Barton, being, as he imagined, free to choose between her and her cousin, and had set it down to her being so much better provided with this world's goods; while, with Hester, this report of Maria's melancholy looks once more revived her apprehensions.

'You do not yourself, considering your good report of things in general,' Langton went on more gravely, 'look quite as cheerful as I expected to find you.'

'I have had a headache, which has perhaps left its traces,' said Hester; 'indeed, but for that I should have been of the party to Saltby.'

'I see; and a churchyard is not the place to raise one's spirits. Come, as you were

going into the town, permit me to be your escort. I had intended to pay you a visit at Medbury before I left Shingleton, but since I have so fortunately met you that will not be necessary.'

'But I do hope you will stay till to-morrow at least, and be introduced to my aunt and Maria. I am sure they will be delighted to welcome you.'

'I am not so sure of that, at least as regards one of them,' said Langton quietly. 'It is a subject which it is not necessary to go into, but Lady Barton can hardly wish to renew her acquaintance with me, nor am I on my part desirous that she should do so. Do not look so pained'—for Hester had grown very grave with the sudden recollection of Lady Barton's treatment of her mother, which she felt but too certain her companion had in his mind—'for since she is kind to you that makes up for much, and even leaves me her debtor.'

Hester would not have disputed the matter even had Philip Langton's objections to her hostess been of a far more trivial kind. They may be well-meaning but they are very foolish folk, who endeavour to draw people who are manifestly antagonistic to one another into personal relations; the shortest road in most cases to reach the sought-for goal of 'forget and forgive' is to keep apart as much as possible. It is very natural, of course, that we should desire our friends to be friends with one another, but they cannot be compelled to do so; and in bringing the horse to water which he does not want to drink, we not only fail in making him do so, but give him a distaste for the water even greater than he had before.

Nothing more, therefore, was said about Philip Langton visiting Medbury, and the rest of the morning was spent by himself and Hester in rambling over the little town and talking together of old times and old friends,

which, when hearts are in accord, is perhaps the most charming of all talk. It was arranged that late in the afternoon Hester should again come into Shingleton, for which the meeting of the excursion party on their return from Saltby afforded an excellent excuse, and that they should see as much of one another as Langton's limited stay permitted. In the meantime, Hester returned to the Castle, in accordance with her aunt's directions, to play the part of hostess to Sir Reginald at the luncheon-table.

CHAPTER XLII.

FEARS.

It was a strange experience to Hester Darrell to find herself sitting at the head of the table in the vast dining-room of the Castle, with the old Baronet for her guest, and after the meal was over, and he was having his cigar, as his custom was, in the conservatory, she laughingly alluded to it.

'My dear young lady,' replied Sir Reginald gallantly, 'it may have seemed strange to you, but there was certainly no incongruity in the matter. I know no one, not even Lady Barton herself, who is better fitted to do the honours of Medbury than yourself.'

'It is very gracious of you to say so, Sir

Reginald, but I fear I should be a little like the lady in the ballad under similar circumstances—rather oppressed with "the burden of the honour unto which I was not born."'

'That is because you have an old fogey like myself to entertain alone; if the young Lord of Burleigh was sitting opposite to you, you would feel no such embarrassment.'

The remark, though natural enough, was one of those 'no thoroughfare' observations which do not easily admit of reply; it seemed suggestive, nevertheless, to the speaker himself, for he sat silent as if in thought for some moments, and then observed, *à propos de bottes*, 'I wish our dear Maria took a little more interest in the Castle, of which she will so soon be the mistress; it is surprising how little she seems to appreciate it, or indeed her position generally.'

'I am sure she very much appreciates her position as your son's *fiancée*, Sir Reginald,' said

Hester earnestly, 'and will make him a most devoted wife.'

'I suppose so, yes,' continued the other, stroking his grey moustache with a meditative air; 'but if Francis was nobody in particular, had not only not distinguished himself as he has done, but had not had his prestige in the way of birth and so on—upon my life I almost think Maria would have liked him just as well.'

'That is surely to her credit,' said Hester, smiling, 'for it proves that she loves him for himself alone, and not for any extraneous reason.'

'Good girl, good girl,' smiled the old Baronet, laying his thin fingers upon Hester's hand approvingly, 'you will not have one word said against your friend, but turn even what seems like dispraise of her into eulogy.'

'It is because I know no one so gentle and good and pure,' said Hester simply.

'I grant all that.'

'And what an "all" it is, Sir Reginald!'

'No doubt, no doubt,' he answered with a

sigh. His words were confident enough, but his tone had dissatisfaction in it; in his heart of hearts he would have preferred a daughter-in-law not so much rapt in the Eternities as to be oblivious to the claims of ancient lineage, or so fixed on goodness as to be indifferent to the greatness that is conferred by social position. Then after a long pause, 'How the wind is rising! I fear our friends will have a rough passage home.'

'They will be delayed, no doubt. I have taken upon myself to put the dinner back for an hour. I hope that will not inconvenience you, Sir Reginald.'

The Baronet either did not hear her, or deemed such a matter unworthy of attention.

'I hope,' he continued, 'if the gale is serious, that they will have the prudence to post by road from Saltby. Frank has done it many times with me when he was a boy.'

'Then he will be sure to suggest it to them in case of need.'

'I am afraid not,' said Sir Reginald apprehensively; 'the thought of danger never enters his head.'

'But he will think of it for others.'

'To be sure, I was forgetting the others,' said the old gentleman naïvely.

The weather had grown really threatening, and even in the comparative shelter which the Castle afforded the wind made itself distinctly heard.

'They should be at Saltby now,' said the old man, consulting his watch, 'and about starting for home. It is some way round by the road, but with good cattle they should be home in four hours.'

Hester was alarmed by the old man's evident anxiety, but forbore to increase it by questioning him. It was possible indeed that his devotion to his son, and the nervousness which comes with advancing years, might have made him unnecessarily apprehensive, but he was not naturally, she knew, a man to give

way to fears of any kind. Hester found herself becoming infected with her companion's misgivings, and eagerly desirous to have the opinion of some competent person respecting the weather and its probable effects upon the arrival of the *Javelin*. Her impatience, indeed, after a while became uncontrollable. 'I am afraid, Sir Reginald, I must leave you now,' she ventured presently, 'as I have business at Shingleton.'

It was very unusual with Sir Reginald to remain at the Castle, except on express invitation, and Hester guessed at once that his determination to do so arose from his wish to abbreviate suspense and 'see the first of them,' as it were, on the arrival of the absentees. It seemed rather hard-hearted under such circumstances to leave the old gentleman alone, but she could not break her appointment with Mr. Langton, whom there was no knowing when she might have the opportunity of seeing again.

She took the same way to the town that she

had taken that morning, but her progress was much more slow by reason of the wind, which was against her. At the top of the hill, indeed, she found it difficult to cope with it; the whole aspect of the scene, both land and sea, was altered by the fury of the elements; the trees were bent one way as though they had been but long grasses; the air was full of sand which stung the face, and with flakes of foam flying inland; the sky, the early blue of which had soon changed to grey, was now a mass of ragged clouds that flew before the whip of the wind like a shattered army; the blast was such that it seemed as though King Winter had come back again and deposed the young Spring-time. The sea was white with foam as far as eye could reach, and, though at a distance, made its sullen roar heard with terrible distinctness. Hester had learnt enough of its ways by this time to know, by the quarter from which the wind blew, that there was mischief as well as menace in it. In the whole

expanse of the bay, and beyond it, far out to sea, not a sail was to be seen; every boat had sought a safe anchorage, or put in for shelter.

It was very unlikely, she thought, that Sir Abraham, if another route were suggested to him, would risk the discomforts of such a voyage; she felt with Sir Reginald that the little party were very likely to return by road; but, on the other hand, they might not do it, and even if they should she trembled—though she strove to feel that it was only ignorance, the mother of false fear, that made her do so—for those who should remain perforce on board the *Javelin*.

Philip Langton was staying at the Marine Hotel, which he had elected to do in preference to accepting the hospitality of the Vicar, and on the little sheltered green in front of it Hester found him pacing to and fro, somewhat impatiently. He had grudged the hours she had been compelled to give to the entertainment

of Sir Reginald, and which must needs be deducted from their time together, and was perhaps inclined to pooh-pooh her apprehensions about the voyagers, from a little feeling of jealousy. Hester seemed to him wrapped up in what were, to him, her new acquaintances at the Castle, rather to the exclusion of her older friends, of whom he would have conversed with her; she appeared to listen to him with only half attention. On the other hand, he was very pleased to find her so happily located at Medbury.

'It is an inexpressible pleasure to me, Hester,' he said, 'though not an unselfish one, since the circumstance frees me from some personal embarrassment upon your account, that you have found a home at the Castle. Your aunt, of course, looks upon you now as one of the family.'

'It would be very ungrateful of me to deny it,' she answered earnestly; 'but yet, at the risk of being thought ungrateful and also unreason-

able, I must tell you that I do not contemplate any long stay at Medbury.'

'Not a long stay?' exclaimed her companion in amazement; 'and why not, my dear Hester? I thought I understood that you were delighted with the place and all contained in it.'

'That is true,' she answered in hesitating tones; 'it is a matter which I can scarcely make intelligible to you, I fear, but in a few weeks there will be certain changes there and —and—in short, I have written to dear Mrs. West, who does not despair of finding a home for me which, in some respects, at all events, will be more agreeable to me.'

'A home!—but what kind of home?'

'Well, not such a palace as my present one, no doubt, but one where I shall feel more my own mistress. I did not write to you about it, dear Mr. Langton, because you have already been troubled enough by my caprices.'

'Pray do not speak of trouble,' he interrupted hastily; 'nothing is trouble to me that is undertaken for your benefit; but I must confess that what you tell me gives me great distress of mind. "More your own mistress," you say, and "changes" at Medbury. You mean, I suppose, that when these young people are married they will live at the Castle, and though it is pleasant enough to be the guest of its present mistress, it might not be agreeable to live there under another *régime*?'

'Yes, that is it,' murmured Hester faintly. It was impossible to be more explicit. She had been a long time reflecting upon the consequences of the impending change at Medbury. As regarded herself, her position indeed would remain in all probability unaltered, but although she had not as yet spoken of her intention to any of its inmates, she had resolved to leave the Castle.

In beholding Francis Drake under the same roof, as her cousin's accepted lover, she had

already borne as much as her heart could bear without breaking; to remain there after the marriage she felt, for the present at least, would be intolerable to her, while the reason of her departure would be one too intelligible to her aunt to arouse any unpleasant discussion.

'The ways of young women are certainly past all finding out,' murmured Philip Langton; but he had too much good sense as well as good feeling to argue the matter, only he secretly reserved to himself the right of consulting with Mrs. West upon the subject, and of taking care that Hester's new home, as she called it, should at least not be one of those in a gentleman's family, 'highly genteel,' such as John Parry used to sing of, where she would have to impart the rudiments of a polite education to half-a-dozen young ladies and two little boys in return for its hospitality. He had a horror derived from conventional prejudice, and only excusable on the ground

of his personal devotion to her, of his dead friend's daughter going out as a governess.

They fell to talking of other matters, which, however, did not arise with the same naturalness as on the previous occasion; the fact was, the minds of both of them were now preoccupied, that of Langton with the unexpected and unwelcome intelligence he had just received from his ward, and that of Hester with the threatening appearance of the weather, which made her more and more uneasy. At last her nervousness became so great that she could keep her apprehensions to herself no longer, but communicated them to her companion, who made light of them.

'I have been at sea in far worse weather than this, my dear Hester,' he said consolingly, 'and in a much smaller craft than that which carried your friends; they have that which "needs no aid of sail or oar, and heeds no spite of wind or tide," remember, on their side. A steam-vessel has nothing to fear from

a breeze like this. Nevertheless, let us go down to the jetty and take counsel's opinion upon the matter.'

Upon the jetty there was already a little crowd of people on the look-out for the return of their friends, and among them the same sailor to whom Langton had spoken upon the subject that morning.

'The wind seems to have freshened a good deal,' said Langton cheerfully; 'I suppose, since it's dead against her, the boat will be delayed some time?'

The sailor, who was looking through his glass, did not trouble himself to remove his eye from the instrument, or, had he caught sight of the pale anxious face beside that of his questioner, he might have shaped his answer differently.

'Delayed!' was the contemptuous rejoinder. 'I should think she *would* be delayed. Master Paul will be lucky if he ever sees Shingleton lights again.'

Langton would have led Hester away, but she slipped her hand from his arm and put it on the sailor's shoulder.

'Lor' bless 'ee, is it you, miss?' he exclaimed, his bluff brown face puckering into a smile as he recognised her. 'Well, I'm glad to see *you* safe on dry land, at all events.'

'But, John, tell me the truth; there is danger, I know,' she faltered.

'Tut, tut, why there's always danger, missie, to them as tempts the sea,' he interrupted gently; 'a smiling, smooth-faced wench she is as sets her back up uncommon quick without a word of warning, but if one knows how to humour her, as my old messmate Paul does, she will do nobody no mischief. As to what you heard me a-saying about him, it was only my way of speaking like; he'll come home again, never fear, and empty many a keg of whisky yet.'

'You are not deceiving me, John Arnott,'

said Hester pitifully, 'you are not deluding me with false hopes?'

'As I am a Christian man, missie,' returned the sailor solemnly, 'there is nothing in my opinion in either wind or wave to-day to make a man who knows his trade uneasy.'

'Thank you, thank you, John,' answered Hester fervently, and perceiving a poor woman near her straining her eyes to southward, and evidently come on the same errand as herself, she went to comfort her with John Arnott's dictum.

'There *is* danger, is there not?' said Philip Langton under his breath.

'Yes, sir, yes,' was the serious rejoinder; 'it's not that the weather is anything much to be frightened of, as I told the young lady, if one had only a good ship under one, but what I did not tell her is that the old *Javelin* is not fit to face a head-wind, much less such a gale as this is like to be. She'll never come

to yonder landing-place—not whole—and if you'll take my advice you'll get Miss Darrell to go home. That's the best place—though bad's the best—to meet bad news such as will come to Shingleton, I fear, before this time to-morrow.'

For the present, however, it was impossible to persuade Hester to leave the shore; though partially reassured by the smooth prophecy of the old sailor, she was still in a state of great anxiety, which was increased by seeing it reflected on the face of the increasing crowd. They were most of them more or less connected with the sea themselves, or, at all events, had passed their lives in its neighbourhood, and if they had not the experience of John Arnott, they knew a breeze from a gale, and the dangers of the coast.

When the evening began to close in, and the *Javelin* had been overdue some hours, Philip Langton made another effort to persuade his charge to return to the Castle, and

this time he succeeded with an ease that astonished himself. The fact was, she remembered for the first time (for at the moment she had paid but little attention to it) what Sir Reginald had said about the party coming home by the road, and this vague chance (a proof how low her hopes had fallen with respect to the coming of the *Javelin*) began to loom largely in her mind. Even at this instant might they not all have arrived safely at Medbury? So Langton remained on the watch at Shingleton, and Hester stepped into a fly and was driven home. It was not so wild a night as that on which she had accompanied the Vicar to visit Mrs. Bertram, but in the state of tension in which her mind was placed, just as a harp tightly strung will answer to the lightest touch, every wail of the wind sent a shiver through her veins.

CHAPTER XLIII.

WATCHING.

WHO of us has arrived at maturity and is so fortunate as not to know what suspense and terror are, in respect to those we love? Even in waiting for the doctor there are moments which, if there is any truth in the doctrine of compensation, should have years of enjoyment by way of offset. Who would be born, if he had the choice to endure those weary hours of watching and waiting that are the lot of most of us, by the bedside of those we love and are about to lose?

The sins of humanity are indeed dark and terrible, but they do not escape comment; whilst its fears and sorrows—equally sad in

their way, though not as shocking—seem to me to have a scant recognition. We are all miserable sinners; but since we are not happy sinners it is surely permissible to feel a little pity for ourselves. The necessity of a future life is insisted upon freely enough for the punishment of the wicked, but surely is it not also necessary as a counterpoise to the weight of wretchedness which our frail nature has to bear? Had Hester Darrell been a mere selfish, heartless woman, she would not only have suffered no torture from the contemplation of the possible catastrophe, from which she was unable for one moment to distract her mind, but might have found much food for satisfaction in it; whereas, as matters were, it presented itself before her as unmixed misfortune and blankest misery. It is surely worthy of consideration how much good people lose, as regards the misfortunes of others, which to them a most poignant regret, are to the base a matter of indifference, or where

personal benefit arises from them, even a subject of congratulation.

It was not twenty minutes' drive from Shingleton to Medbury, but to Hester it seemed a lifetime. Her heart, as she entered the great gates, sank within her, and she felt so sick with evil presage that the question she had framed to ask the lodge-keeper as to whether the party had arrived by road never found expression. The silence of the man himself rendered it unnecessary; he would have been sure to tell her had his master and the rest arrived already. One incident took place as they reached the Castle which would have helped to shatter her nerves had it not impressed her with the paramount necessity for self-control. No sooner had the carriage drawn up at the foot of the stone steps than the door opened, and the Baronet himself came hurrying down them. In his anxiety and confusion he had not noticed that the vehicle was a fly and not Sir Abraham's car-

riage, and his look of disappointment and dismay when he beheld Hester sitting alone in it was terrible to witness.

'They are not come, then?' he said, with a half groan.

'Not yet, Sir Reginald?' returned Hester gently; 'the wind and tide are against them, and it is not expected at Shingleton that the steamer will be in for some time.'

He led her into the dining-room, which happened to be the nearest room with a fire in it, for, indeed, she looked in need of warmth, and placing her in an arm-chair, sat down beside her. The table was brilliantly set out with glass and silver, but somehow it looked as cheerless as if it had only worn a bare white cloth. It merely suggested to both of them preparation in vain.

'My dear, you must take something to eat,' said the old man kindly. 'It is long past the dinner-hour, and I am sure that when they come home——'

He was going to say that if on their arrival they found that they had been waited for so long, it would distress them; but his own simple words, 'when they come home,' had utterly overwhelmed him. He sat with voiceless lips and shaking head, like one with the palsy.

'A little wine,' said Hester, 'would do us both good.'

She was not in want of wine herself, and as for food, she felt as though even a morsel of bread would have choked her, but she thought that her companion would be the better for it, and, indeed, so it turned out. Becoming a little refreshed and strengthened, Sir Reginald began to interrogate her about her experiences at Shingleton, and the opinions expressed of the chances of the safe return of the steamer. Conversation, even upon the most anxious topic, when we are in suspense, is less intolerable than silence, and the old Baronet presently recovered his self-command, and even went so

far as to apologise for his unreasonable despondency.

'Time was, my dear young lady, when I should have been little inclined to meet misfortunes half way, and when they came I should have known how to bear them; but now I am like a blind man who is threatened with the loss of his staff. Without that I shall be able to grope my way to the grave, and that is all.'

The allusion to his son was unmistakable, and it touched Hester nearly. 'Forgive an old man's weakness,' he continued apologetically; 'how selfish it is of me thus to melt a heart so tender; but you loved him, too; I know you loved him.'

The observation under other circumstances would have been embarrassing enough, though it was doubtful in what sense Sir Reginald made it; but as matters were, it was the fact of his already speaking of his son in the past tense that distressed Hester.

'The issues of life and death lie in stronger hands than ours,' she murmured.

'True, true; it may be we shall see his face again. The father of such a lad should not know fear. Surely, since he has been so kind to others, the shield of the despised and oppressed, Heaven will defend him from the pitiless waves. So gentle and brave! and such a good son, my dear! such a good son!'

The old man's words would have touched a less tender heart than Hester Darrell's, even had his son been a stranger to her. What inexpressibly increased their pathos was their unexpectedness. For up to this moment, though Sir Reginald had never appeared to her a hard man, she had always associated him with a certain stiffness and dignity. Though by no means in an arrogant sense, he had shown himself fully conscious of his own importance. The loss of home and land had, as is usual in such cases, in no way affected him in that respect, but, on the contrary, had

made him resentful of the least lack of deference from those about him. To see him now, with all the pride of birth forgotten, and nothing but the father in his piteous face and trembling voice, was a pathetic sight. What moved Hester more than all, however, though it gave her as much pain as pity, was his taking it for granted that his son was almost as dear to her as he was to himself; for as time went on, and the flame of hope seemed to burn lower and lower, he appeared to throw away all reserve, and spoke of him to her as to a fellow-mourner. Had he guessed what was the real state of the case with her all along, and put it from him until this terrible moment, when it seemed to matter not whether Maria or she had had the offer of his son's hand? or was it merely that in the misery that monopolised him, all about him seemed to have part?

'It is hot and stifling here. Let us go out on the terrace,' he presently said. It was not stifling, nor, indeed, at all too warm, in the

great dining-room, but Hester consented to his proposal at once; she well understood that his desire was, as before, to get the very first news of the absent ones in roll of wheel or beat of hoof, if any such was now to come. But as she opened the dining-room door a great wind seemed to fill the house, and a shrill wail broke upon the ear inexpressibly weird and sad.

'Hark! hark!' cried the old man, staggering back into a chair, while the door, breaking from Hester's hand, closed with a heavy bang; 'that is the warning!'

'What do you mean, Sir Reginald?'

'Hush! listen!' Again and again the shrill, weird wail arose and fell, and then all was comparatively silent, save for the shaking of the shutters and the fretful gale without. 'They are drowned! they are all drowned!' he murmured with a gasp of horror.

'How can you tell? Why distrust the mercy of Heaven, Sir Reginald?—though

indeed, if we knew all, what seems its deafness to our prayer may be the truest mercy.'

The spirit of her cousin Maria, if indeed it had parted from its bodily form, seemed to have entered into her.

'I tell you they are drowned. That is the sign that comes to this unhappy house when it has changed owners.'

'At such a time as this, sir, you should be ashamed of such superstitions,' said Hester reproachfully. 'When human lives are at stake, what matters into whose hands fall house and land? Moreover, what you heard *I* heard; it was nothing but the wind, the draught of which was perhaps increased by the opening of the door.'

'What time is it?' inquired the old man hoarsely; he not only paid no attention to her words, but seemed to be wholly unconscious of them.

As Hester looked up at the great Louis Quatorze clock upon the mantelpiece it began

to strike the hour of nine. The steamer was now four hours behind its time; four hours in a voyage that under ordinary conditions should have only taken three!

Sir Reginald did not again express any wish to go out-of-doors; all hope seemed to have died within him. He spoke but little, and as often as not to himself, as though Hester had not been present. She caught broken words about India, and scenes of battle. He seemed to be recalling the conversation of his son, or perhaps some portion of his letters. 'A good boy! a brave boy!' he would sometimes murmur. Hester had sat by death-beds far less painful. Once or twice the old butler came in, with grave, pained face and the offer of refreshment, which was always declined. So the night passed away at last, and the grey dawn began to peep in through the crannies to the watchers; but it brought no relief. They were not as the sick man who

longs for the morning, for it only brought them face to face with desolation and despair.

As soon as it was light a messenger arrived from Shingleton, with a note from Philip Langton to Hester. He had been up all night, as many others had been, and, indeed, had scarcely quitted his post upon the jetty.

'I have no news for you, dearest girl, and no news is not, alas! good news. Nothing has been heard of the steamer. Had it not left Saltby yesterday afternoon we should, of course, have had word of it. I do not say, give up all hope; the *Javelin* may have been blown ashore, in which case it is almost impossible that the worst could have happened—that is, that all the precious lives she held could have been lost. Nevertheless, it is well that you should be prepared for the worst. I have ventured to telegraph to Mrs. West. Whatever happens there will be no harm done, and I am well convinced she will not grudge a little inconvenience for the sake of one so dear to

her. If our gravest fears should unhappily be realised, it is out of the question that you should remain at the Castle alone. Quite a fleet of fishing-boats are putting out on the probable track of the steamer, and I am sending horsemen to search the whole coast between this and Saltby. But, after all is done, it is but little; and again I say, dearest girl, be prepared for evil tidings, for such in any case I fear there must now needs be. You may trust to me to understand your wishes in all respects, but I would recommend you not to come into Shingleton.'

That last recommendation was to Hester the most terrible of all the sad contents of Philip Langton's letter. She well knew what it meant. Her presence would now be of no service to any of her living friends, and he was solicitous to spare her the shock of seeing their lifeless bodies thrown by the pitiless waves on shore. It is doubtful, if she had had only herself to consider, whether she would have taken

such advice, but in view of Sir Reginald's state of mind, whom she could hardly leave, and who was certainly in no condition to face the possibilities at which Mr. Langton hinted, she decided to remain at the Castle and await events. It was a waiting which to the last day of her life she never forgot.

CHAPTER XLIV.

DANGER.

As Philip Langton had remarked of her, it was with no smiling face that Maria Barton had embarked upon the pleasure trip to Saltby, but, on the other hand, there had been no gloom upon it. On such an occasion, and judging from the young ladies with whom he was acquainted, he had doubtless looked for a gaiety of expression which was, in fact, foreign to her character. There was nothing in her external appearance to give rise to comment among those who were acquainted with her. If Francis Drake had loved her with the same devotion with which she regarded him, it is probable, indeed, it would have struck him

that her voice was graver than it was wont to be when addressing him, and that her hand did not rest upon his arm with the same trustful tenderness—for trust and tenderness can be expressed even by a touch—as heretofore. But he noticed nothing of this, and only concluded that she was disinclined for conversation, and so far he was right. Maria, indeed, had something to say to him, but it was not easy to decide how or when to say it, and in the meantime she had that and much else to think about, and silence was a relief to her.

Lady Barton remained shut up in her carriage, also not without matters for reflection. The sight of the stranger on the jetty had awakened memories which she had fondly hoped had been cast asleep for ever. He was the only person alive, save one old woman, who was cognisant of the real reason of the hate and jealousy she had shown towards her sister: of the love, that is, she had secretly entertained for the man that her sister had

married. There was nothing to fear from this occurrence, of course; no husband concerns himself with his wife's love affairs (at all events if they have come to nothing) of twenty years ago; and, indeed, if Lady Barton had allowed herself a little flirtation or two at a much later date, it is probable that Sir Abraham would have regarded it with much equanimity; but the incident was, nevertheless, disagreeable to her, and even humiliating. It was to be hoped that this person was not making any protracted stay in Shingleton, and especially that if he visited the Castle to see Hester, whose guardian (as of course her ladyship was aware) he had been constituted, it would be that very day. She congratulated herself not a little on that account that she was not at home, albeit her position was not otherwise altogether enviable, shut up in the carriage with her husband, whom the motion of the vessel made rather uncomfortable, and most unmistakably cross.

The rest of the passengers—those at least

who did not suffer from sea-sickness—were in high spirits: most of them in that wild state of excitement which seizes people at the commencement of a pleasure trip of any kind, till it fades off in fatigue, or worse.

Captain Paul himself, however, did not partake of the general hilarity; he had partaken of something else before starting—in drinking success to the first voyage of the season at the expense of his admirers—which made him sullen and sulky. His answers, when addressed by any of the passengers, were curt, and their questions, which were generally about the ship and the weather, often appeared to require consultation of the charts or instruments in his cabin, for he would descend into it abruptly without answering them at all, and remain there, immersed, doubtless, in scientific reflection. His presence on deck, however, was unnecessary, for the vessel was going merrily before the wind, and making, it was agreed on all hands, a good passage.

Janet Parkes was as happy as anybody. The fresh breeze seemed to give her a modicum of health and strength; her lungs drank it in with the same grateful relish that the thirsty soul feels in the cool draught; her eyes roved over the tossing sea with an appreciation of the exhilarating scene that is only known to those to whom the four walls of a sick-room have been their only prospect for many months; it almost seemed to her fond mother that she had taken a new lease of life. What added to Janet's happiness was, that she was seated next Miss Barton, who conversed with her upon the various objects of interest, and manifested the same sympathy with her unwonted enjoyment as she had always shown with her pains and aches. It was only perhaps what those who knew Maria Barton best might have expected of her, but she seemed to listen to the simple talk of the sick girl with a pleasure at least as great as that with which she received the observations of her lover, who sat beside her on

the other side. It is doubtful whether the talk between these two young people was ever of the same nature as is commonly used by similarly situated couples; there could not be more devotion on the one hand, or more affectionate regard upon the other, but the former feeling (before marriage) is generally on the man's side, and the latter on the woman's, whereas in their case it was the contrary. The Captain could have quoted honestly enough the poet's admiration for his mistress:

> Madam, I do as is my duty,
> Honour the shadow of your shoe tie.

There was nothing about Maria which, in his eyes, was not invested with a profound respect, but he showed very little of a lover's passion. Maria, on the other hand, felt such an adoration for him as gave some trouble to her tender conscience, as being more than she ought to pay to one who, however estimable in her eyes, was, after all, but a mere human creature. But on the present occasion she

abstained from offering at his shrine the customary incense. It was observed of them, by some of their humbler companions, that the Captain and his young lady were a silent pair.

Silence was not the characteristic of their fellow-passengers. The little Fortescues, in particular, who explored the ship as they had been wont to investigate every nook and cranny of their old cave-dwelling, made their laughter heard above the piping of the wind, and danced to it as if it had been music. It is probable that never before had so much pleasure been conferred upon any children at two shillings a head.

Miss Nicobar, of course, was not merry, but she made complaint much less audibly than usual. Nevertheless, it was certainly a most ungrateful thing in Heppy, after having had such a treat conferred upon her as a free ticket to Saltby, to show symptoms of sea-sickness, which rendered her utterly useless to her in-

dulgent mistress. 'It is an instructive illustration of the equality of our fallen race,' remarked Mrs. Purcell, who was herself a good sailor, 'that that young woman and Sir Abraham should be fellow-sufferers from the motion of the vessel.' The excellent lady was rather disappointed that Lady Barton remained unaffected by it; a feeling, of course, which originated from charitable motives, since, as she said, for persons of a bilious temperament there is nothing like a little sea-sickness now and then.

There was a band on board, which added to the general hilarity by its enlivening strains, and altogether the voyage to Saltby, though, in spite of the favouring wind, it took some time beyond that in which it was usually accomplished, was pronounced a decided success. Their late arrival caused the time allowed for the excursionists in that little seaport to be curtailed by proclamation, and Sir Abraham and his party did not even leave the ship. It is always difficult, however, to collect together

a flock of pleasure-seekers with any punctuality; and though the bell of the *Javelin* often clanged its importunate summons, to Miss Nicobar's audible indignation, and to Sir Abraham's unspeakable disgust, its passengers were not re-embarked till long past the appointed hour.

It is universally known that time and tide wait for no man, but the effects produced by that inconvenient habit on the part of the latter are little understood by landsmen. They can understand it in the case of a river, where they can see the stream running up or running down, but ebb and flow on the sea (unless they are picnicking or shell-hunting on the beach) appear all one to them.

If Sir Abraham had known that the tide would turn in an hour and be consequently against the *Javelin* on its return voyage, with all its retarding effects, it is probable that he would have utilised their stay at Saltby to get the carriage out and to post home by land, for

there was small chance, indeed, of his otherwise reaching it in time for dinner.

This became evident enough, indeed, as soon as they started, and while the tide was still with them; for the wind, which had hitherto helped their progress, was now in the very teeth of the *Javelin*, if such a phrase could be used in the case of so ancient and decrepit a vessel, and she made way very slowly. On rounding the promontory that shielded Saltby from the north-east she began to labour in a painful manner, and even to the uninstructed mind of those on board, as they watched the coast, seemed to make alarmingly slow progress. The steward, however—that friend of those who make their pleasure upon the great waters—upon being cross-examined, protested that all was right, and that they would reach Shingleton before nightfall.

Sir Abraham, by this time exhausted, cared little what was happening, and her ladyship, never one to trouble herself about matters out

of her province, was still thinking about her own affairs. Otherwise it is possible, had they been sufficiently alarmed, that they might have insisted upon the captain putting back to Saltby, a course which in fact had become highly advisable, and which their position and influence would probably have induced him to take. Had Francis Drake been a sailor instead of a soldier he would most certainly have insisted upon this being done, and would have had his way, since the matter involved the safety of Maria and so many women and children, even though it would have necessitated his taking the obstinate old salt by the scruff of his neck and locking him up in his own cabin; but he was ignorant of the danger that threatened them, and his nature was not one of those which are sensitive to peril.

One or two of the more nervous passengers had already made anxious inquiries of the captain upon the subject, and had received for their reply that 'there was no danger, but a

great deal of fear,' an observation which had been rendered more forcible, if not convincing, by a hailstorm of invective.

One thing indeed was manifest to them, that Captain Paul was exceedingly intoxicated, and it was not a reassuring circumstance; but as the sailors informed them that he was as good a sailor drunk as sober, and even better —that intoxication, in fact, was, professionally speaking, his *forte* rather than his weakness—they took what comfort from it they could.

As the hours sped on, and the *Javelin* did not—indeed, she hardly seemed to make any headway at all—matters began to look serious even to the most confiding. Francis Drake rose from his seat, and, throwing away the remnant of his tenth cigar, addressed himself, in the absence of the skipper—whose retirements below for the purpose of scientific observation had grown more frequent than ever—to the mate of the vessel.

'We are going very slowly, are we not,

Garnet? Why, at this rate we shall not reach Shingleton before ten o'clock.'

'That's true, sir,' answered the man gravely. John Garnet was a very quiet steady old fellow, whom Drake as a boy had known well before he went to India. 'You see the tide has turned against us, and the wind is very strong. Moreover, the old *Javelin* is not what she used to be.'

'But if we can't go forward had we not better go back?'

The mate nodded significantly. 'It would be a great deal better—between you and me—if we could, sir; but my opinion is as we could never round Saltby Point in this weather; that's the capen's view too, though he's too proud to say so. He'll believe in the old *Javelin* till she sinks under him. And, indeed—whatever it might have been two hours ago—our best chance now is to go on. The water, when we get into the bay, will not be so rough, and if we can only hold on——'

'We're in great danger, then?' put in the young man quietly, but in lower tones. 'Don't hesitate to tell me the truth, my man; it shall go no farther.'

'Well, of course not. You're too wise a gentleman, Master Francis, to frighten all these poor people out of their lives before their time, but, in my judgment, there are few of us here who will see Shingleton again.'

'Is it not possible to run the boat ashore?' inquired Francis Drake after a pause. The undreamt-of peril that was menacing Maria and all on board had for the moment shocked him. It seemed like a massacre of the innocents.

'No, sir; there are sandbanks everywhere between us and the land, and by the time the tide rises high enough to float the *Javelin* over them not two planks of her will be left together.'

'What are those lights yonder?'

'The Carr lights and Rensham Island.'

'But if we can see those lights they could see *us*. Have we no rockets or danger-signals?'

The mate shook his head.

'At all events we might try to make ourselves heard. Is there no gun on board?'

Again the mate shook his head.

'There's nothing on board,' he answered bitterly, 'that a ship ought to have. The old *Javelin* 's been sailed upon the cheap for the last twelve months or more, and now I reckon we're a-going to pay dear for it. Our only boat is rotten and useless; it would not live for two minutes in a sea like this.'

'There's the steamer's bell; to ring *that* will be surely better than to do nothing.'

'I doubt it, sir; the wind is against the sound getting to Rensham, even if it could be borne there in any case; and remember this, if once that bell is set going it will be taken by nine-tenths of the poor folks on board as their death-knell. I've been wrecked myself before

this voyage, and I know the sort of scene that such a proceeding will bring about; and, after all, if the old ship can only keep afloat till daylight, we may be all right yet.'

'There is absolutely no chance then of her reaching home?'

'In my judgment very little, sir. Just listen to the throb of her engines!'

They were indeed beating with a heavy and laboured thud, as though the task they were set to do were beyond their expiring strength. It was doubtful whether the vessel was making any way at all.

The gloom of evening, which was now settling down upon the scene, and shutting out all sight of shore, produced that feeling of isolation which is so depressing to the landsman. All sounds of gaiety had long been hushed; the band had ceased to play, and the children, fatigued or frightened, were nestling in their mothers' arms on deck, or had fallen asleep in the cabins. What, to those who

understood the matter, was very significant of the growing alarm among the adults, all sea-sickness, even among those who had previously suffered most from it, had ceased, though the motion of the vessel was even more unsteady than it had been, and the waves beat her this way and that—but never forward—with increased fury.

Captain Paul was still below, and every now and then a white-faced passenger would come up to the mate and inquire, 'At what time shall we reach Shingleton?' in a voice that seemed to suggest the further and much more serious inquiry, 'Or shall we ever reach it at all?' To all these questioners John Garnet returned as cheerful replies as his conscience permitted, nor could Francis Drake withhold his admiration for the consideration for others, as well as the coolness and courage that dictated them.

For a long time the sea had swept the ship in such a manner as to drive all below who

feared a wetting, though a large number of male passengers and some few females still kept the deck, perhaps as much from nervousness as dislike of the heat and closeness of the cabin; but now it became evident to Francis Drake that a considerable quantity of water was being admitted through the opening seams. He remarked on this to Garnet, who quietly answered, 'Yes; that is what comes of tinkering up a worn-out craft, instead of getting a new one. When I said just now if we can only hold on, I should have said, if we can only hold together.'

At this moment up came Miss Nicobar from the cabin in a great state of excitement and indignation.

'Mr. Mate,' she said, 'are you aware that the cabin is in a most disgraceful condition? I have told the captain, but he is not in a state for anybody, much less a lady of condition, to speak to; the fact is, I have been sitting, without knowing it, ever so long with

my feet in water. The whole cabin floor is covered with it, and it's my belief it's getting deeper.'

'I am very sorry, ma'am; it's bilge water,' returned the mate apologetically. 'The motion of the vessel has cast it up from the hold. In my opinion you had better go and sit yonder by Miss Barton, under the lee of the paddle-box—it's the driest place on deck.'

As Miss Nicobar tottered off in pursuance of this advice, laying hold of ropes and benches to steady herself on the way, John Garnet whispered in the ear of Captain Drake, 'That's the beginning of the end, Master Francis. I have put some life-belts under yonder bunk for the women—though half-a-dozen will not go far amongst fifty of them, poor souls!—and be sure you get one before the rush comes, for Miss Maria.'

CHAPTER XLV.

FOR HIS SAKE.

HARDLY had the words of warning escaped from John Garnet's lips when the ship received a violent shock, which caused her to quiver from stem to stern, and the engines suddenly ceased working. A crowd of terrified passengers rushed up the cabin stairs, and Francis Drake was only just in time to follow the mate's counsel and secure one of the life-belts for Maria, when their hiding-place under the bunk was discovered, and they were seized upon and battled for by fifty arms. Strange to say, in spite of her invalidism, Miss Nicobar, whose sharp eyes had forewarned her of this proceeding, had sprung from her seat and, anticipating the foremost of the throng, had snatched a belt for

herself, and was already engaged in securing it about her precious person.

In crossing the deck to regain his seat at Maria's side, Francis Drake was almost thrown from his feet by a second shock.

'Do not be afraid, dear girl,' he had begun to say, intending even yet to lessen as much as might be the terrors of a catastrophe which he was well convinced had now become imminent, when a certain expression in her face caused him to stop short.

'I am not afraid,' she said with a sad smile, but in clear collected tones. 'I hope I am not going to be. Do not think so ill of me as to endeavour to conceal anything from me now; indeed, it would be useless, for I know all. The ship is sinking.'

'No, no. Who told you that? It must have been some ignorant and frightened passenger.'

'*You* did,' was the unexpected reply. 'I read it in your face when you looked towards

me as you were talking to John Garnet. Do you suppose, Francis, I cannot read your face?' she added, with a touch of bitterness.

Strange words to utter at any time, but in that scene of confusion and uproar, where, save for her comparatively sheltered position, she could scarcely have made herself heard at all, they sounded doubly strange. To Francis Drake every syllable had its significance, and as he reflected on them even the perils in which they were placed were for the moment forgotten. When she begged him not to conceal anything from her *now*, he well understood that she was hinting at quite another matter than their peril; and that when she spoke of reading the very thoughts of his heart in his face, that she was reproaching him with a devotion that was not returned.

As for Maria, so far as she was personally concerned, she seemed wholly indifferent to the terrors which surrounded her. From all sides of her arose cries and prayers, the wildest

appeals for pardon to the divine goodness, and the most passionate entreaties for its protection. To herself, whose whole life might be almost said to be a prayer, the catastrophe seemed to demand neither more nor less of it than any other occasion. She gently put aside the life-belt that Drake was endeavouring to fasten around her, and begged that it might be given to Lady Barton.

'I cannot make my way to the carriage, Francis, but perhaps you can do so. Please take it to her.'

'But I insist upon your wearing it,' he exclaimed vehemently, and almost fiercely. She shook her head. 'Well, it is no matter; it will sustain you both,' he said. 'Do not lose hold of it for a moment, and I will go and fetch your mother.'

This was easier said than done. The deck was now crowded with people, some prostrated by the waves, others carried with frightful violence against the bulwarks, others on their

knees, with their arms round their children's necks, clinging to rails and ropes. He met the captain staggering up the cabin stairs, his face flushed with liquor, his eyes flaming with fury.

'Why don't they man the pumps, the fools!' he cried with a dreadful imprecation.

'Because they are choked with sand, sir,' returned the mate with a relic of respect for his superior still in his tone. 'We have been aground these five minutes.'

'Captain! captain! we are all going to the bottom!' screamed Miss Nicobar's Hephzibah, clinging to his legs.

'How can that be, young woman, when you hear we are at the bottom already?' was the grim rejoinder.

'Put her helm hard a starboard; back her, back her! You firemen, why don't you keep the steam up?'

Monstrous as was the fact, this drunken but dauntless wretch did not know that the fires of

his own ship were out, and that the vessel was practically immovable.

'Well, well, she'll float with the tide,' he observed audaciously.

And it was extraordinary what comfort that speech conveyed to many of those about him, so hard is it for authority, however helpless and contemptible, to lose its hold upon the minds of men.

Without wasting words upon this miserable creature, Drake was making his way to where the carriage of Sir Abraham was fastened, when a sea, greater than any which had hitherto struck her, swept the vessel. It not only washed away many persons with it, whose despairing cries rose above the howling of the wind and wave, but, snapping the great ropes which held it as though they were packthread, it threw the carriage itself on to the starboard quarter, where it smashed the bulwark and plunged into the sea. Drake himself had a narrow escape from being carried with it, and

only saved himself by seizing hold of an iron pin, sunk in the deck, to which some portion of the vehicle had been fastened. It was a sickening spectacle, but it lasted but for a moment; a frightened and despairing face at one of the windows, an agonising shriek from a voice that he hardly recognised, and all was over.

His mission thus terribly concluded for him, he returned as fast as the beating of the ship permitted to the side of Maria. A female form was clinging to her knees, on whom she was in the act of fastening the life-belt which he had given her such strict injunctions to preserve for her own use.

'I should not have used it in any case,' she replied to his reproachful look, 'and to this poor child here'—she pointed to Janet Parkes, crouching and moaning at her feet—'life seems very dear.'

It was plain from her use of the phrase 'in any case,' as well as from the agonised expression of her face, that she was aware of

the catastrophe that had happened to her parents. Yet she spoke not one word concerning it. It was certainly not that her mind was monopolised by the imminence of her own peril, or with her own affairs at all; indeed, one would have thought, from the caresses and consolatory whispers she bestowed on Janet, that the poor girl's life was alone menaced, and not her own at all.

With all the young man's admiration and affectionate regard for Maria, she had always been a problem to him, and never was the solution farther from his mind than on the present occasion, when, as it seemed, they were about to leave the world together. But that he was wholly free from affectation, Francis Drake might have used with truth the phrase attributed to Nelson when a boy, 'I do not know what fear is.' But even he was not insensible to the prospect of a violent end, or to the spectacle of that of his fellow-creatures which offered itself on all sides (for

every wave now carried off its victims), whereas on Maria these things appeared to have no effect at all, except so far as they evoked her efforts to soothe and console the survivors. Was her faith so firm that even this terrible form of death was to her a mere 'flitting'—a removal from a house of clay to an eternal habitation in a shining city? Or was there another and a less spiritual cause for her indifference to life? Whatever may have been her reason, it at all events sufficed, for neither wind nor wave, nor all the havoc they made around her, could extort from her the least sign of fear. There is a well-known shipwreck story, more or less founded on fact, which describes the devotion of a Roman Catholic priest in the last moments of the catastrophe; how, being a strong swimmer, he fought his way through the billows to this or that drowning wretch, and bestowed upon them the last sacraments of the Church at the very instant of their dissolution. And it almost

seemed as if Maria Barton had had the example of this heroic divine before her, so entirely did she give herself up to pacifying and mitigating the terrors of those about her with the consolations of religion.

Many, indeed, were too paralysed by fear to derive any comfort from her ministrations. Miss Nicobar could think or speak of nothing but the ingratitude of her Hephzibah, who, forgetting all considerations of social position, had actually used her superior strength to deprive her mistress of the life-belt and appropriate it to her own use. Mrs. Parkes had been swept from the deck, her eye, to the very last, fixed upon her daughter, who, though in comparative safety—for the paddle-box still hung together—was too overcome by her terrors even to notice her mother's disappearance. But not a few had cause to thank Maria Barton for hope and faith in that hour of need, or at all events for the preservation of their self-respect. To move from place to place was

now become impossible; but, on the other hand, again and again, by the shocks of wind and wave, the passengers of the *Javelin* were thrown together, and for a brief space, so long as their failing strength enabled them to catch and keep a hold, remained so. Among these unfortunate persons were the Rector and his wife, with both of whom Maria had some converse, of a far tenderer as well as graver kind than had ever passed between them before. It was pitiful to hear poor Mrs. Purcell's self-reproaches for having induced her husband to take the voyage, and so to have become the instrument of his destruction; but she showed little fear, while her husband behaved with a dignity which he had certainly never manifested on ordinary occasions, or what, considering the nearness of its end, might almost be termed during life. One or two of the little Fortescues who had survived the rest, seemed also, though crying bitterly, to derive some sense of succour by clinging to Maria's knees.

Thanks to Francis Drake's solicitude, she had been placed in a tolerably secure spot; the paddle-box under which she sat, or rather crouched—for an upright position had long become impossible to any one—still sheltered her and those about her from the violence of the waves, while the other had been torn away. The rest of the passengers who yet survived, either lay huddled together upon deck, or, clinging to rope and chain, and one another, crowded the cabin stairs of the sinking ship.

At this moment the ponderous chimney, which had long broken from its stays, and, swinging from side to side, threatened destruction to the helpless beings beneath it, came down on the deck, bearing with it the mainmast and carrying away in its fall the whole of the starboard bulwarks. The force and weight of the stroke dragged the vessel over—for the moment making the side which had been the higher out of the water the lower—and plunged her so deeply into the sea that it seemed im-

possible, with the waves rolling over her now defenceless deck, that she could ever right again. The very violence of wind and wave, indeed, forced her back again into her old position, but in a still more miserable plight. The loss of human life had been enormous, and especially among those in the vicinity of Maria and her lover; indeed, when sense and breath returned to them—for for an instant they had been actually under water—they found themselves alone. On other parts of the deck, if it could still be called so, there were also little knots of survivors—fathers surrounded by their children, husbands and wives clasped in a last embrace, or even tied together, in the melancholy hope of perishing in one another's arms.

For the most part these poor people were overcome by the lethargy of despair; but a few were still animated by hope. Three of the crew had climbed the foremast, to the top of which they had lashed themselves. One of them was the steward, and when presently a

little black boy belonging to the ship, who cried out piteously in broken English, 'I have no friends!' held out his arms in appeal for help, John Garnet reached down and took him up and tied him with a handkerchief to the spar—an action to which Maria drew Francis Drake's attention with a look that he never forgot. Only in Heaven, he was wont afterwards to say, could he expect to see its counterpart.

A passenger, here and there, had selected a spar or an oar (for the frail boat had been broken to pieces early in the night by a blow from a wave), which, when the ship should go to pieces, should serve to keep them afloat; one had even got the drum, which had long ceased to give out its spirit-stirring sounds, and tied himself to that as to a life-buoy. The windlass, the belfry, where the ship's bell had hung, and the foot of the foremast—everything that gave the least sign of solidity, were each surrounded by a clinging throng.

On the poop, holding on to the wheel, or to the stump of the mainmast, were about a dozen persons, who, either by chance or good judgment, had all along, with few exceptions, kept to that locality. It offered a stubborn resistance to the waves, and moreover, as Drake foresaw, though less sheltered than their own position, might possibly, when the ship broke up, become detached and float with its living burden. To his satisfaction, though it was likely to be short-lived, he perceived that the Rector and his wife, whom he had thought had been engulfed when the mainmast fell, had been swept to this poor ark of safety. To reach it was almost impossible, and if it had been otherwise there was scant room for more, and he well knew that Maria would have refused to impose her presence where it might, even in her case, have been unwelcome. He therefore revolved in his mind what other chances might be open to them when the fatal

moment should arrive, not, indeed, of the ship's sinking under them, for it was already embedded in the sand, but of the rising tide overwhelming it, and its going to pieces. The paddle-box had, indeed, become much loosened at the bottom, though the planking of the roof still held together, and it struck him that if it should part and not turn over, it might form a raft for them, however frail, on which they might float till daylight, when they might be picked up by one of the boats certain to be sent in quest of them—a forlorn hope, indeed, but one that sustained him wonderfully. He had imparted this plan to Maria, but sustained, doubtless, by hopes of another kind, though she smiled gratefully on him, she seemed to give it but little attention.

'One would really think, dear, that life and death were one to you,' pleaded the young man. 'Surely, for my sake——'

She turned her gentle face towards him—

almost all the movement she could make in her cramped and wedged position—with a look of an inexpressible reproach and pain.

'Heaven forgive me, if it be a sin to say so,' she whispered hoarsely, 'but it is *for your sake*, Francis, that I wish to die.'

CHAPTER XLVI.

PARTED.

It is with somewhat unnecessary boastfulness that love is said to conquer death; for, as a matter of fact, there are other emotions—some of them mere passions, such as hate and greed—which do the like, and even in our last hours will cast out from our thoughts the Shadow which is beckoning us none knows whither. To persons, indeed, without imagination, such as the Chinese, not to mention almost all savage tribes, there is no dread of the fact of death at all, but only of the act of it. What made it, indeed, so terrible to the majority of those on board the *Javelin*, was its suddenness and violence, which, save in a few exceptional cases, caused the law of self-preservation to override all other con-

siderations. But with Maria Barton even the immediate prospect of a violent end had no disturbing, or certainly no distracting, effect. Her mind throughout the voyage had been enthralled by one absorbing topic, which, if in one aspect temporal and finite, was in another, at all events in her eyes, indestructible and eternal. Events had subsequently happened which had destroyed the former view of it and left only the latter; because temporal things were coming to an end with her it therefore did not perish; it remained with her like her faith, and could not be cast out by physical danger, however imminent.

Francis Drake, whom no one could accuse of cowardice, was, on the other hand, keenly conscious of their common peril. The youth and strength within him resented the menace of fate and was resolute to oppose it; yet, for the moment, Maria's look and words so diverted his mind from the danger of their position that it made him almost unconscious of it. This

would not have happened, of course, but for his own consciousness of the matter she referred to, which now turned his cheek far paler than the terrors of wind and wave had done.

'I do not understand you, my dear,' he stammered presently; 'if you love me——'

'I do love you,' she interrupted earnestly; 'how much! and how much too much, Heaven only knows! Dear Francis, there is no need now to deceive yourself any longer for my sake. I know the secret of your heart though it may be you have not confessed it even to yourself. You have loved me, yes; but not as you would have loved another—my cousin Hester.'

'She refused me,' murmured the young fellow mechanically; a frankness which, under other circumstances, would have seemed to him almost brutal, had taken possession of his soul and compelled his words. 'My heart was free, dear girl, when I placed it in your keeping.'

'Your hand was free,' she answered in broken tones, 'but not your heart. Hester refused you for my sake. I heard it from her lips this morning.'

'What! did she tell you that?'

'No, she told my mother, and I by chance—no, not by chance, by Heaven's mercy—I overheard her. What a crime have you thus escaped?—from what a wrong, though unconsciously committed, have I been preserved! Not that it matters now,' she added pathetically, 'but oh, how it seemed to matter! For the last twelve hours, Francis, I have been thinking of little else. It would have made no difference if I had lived, be sure, only I should have been so unhappy, because I love you so.'

'And I love *you*, my darling!' returned the young man vehemently, carried beyond himself and out of it, by her gentleness and generosity. 'You are mistaken in supposing that—that I do not love you. We shall be happy yet, dear girl. May Heaven desert me in my last hour

if I do not make you a good and loving husband!'

'Hush, hush!' she whispered gently; 'I know your noble nature; you would have given me all save that which you had not to give, and if you could you would have concealed that lack; but it is better thus. You love me, you say—and I believe it—as a brother loves his only sister.'

'Better far than that,' he answered hoarsely.

'Prove it then by doing what I am about to ask of you.'

'I will do anything; amongst others, I will save you or die myself,' was his reply.

She could not hide her poor wan, weather-beaten face in her hands, as nature dictated, for to have left hold of the arm of the bench on which she sat would have been instant death, but at these loving words her cheeks flushed crimson and her eyes filled with tears.

'It is hard, it is hard,' she murmured.

'Frank dear,' she went on in firmer tones, 'I entreat of you to leave me. Every hour, every minute, that you remain here diminishes your strength, and therefore your chances of safety. The sands are covered now, and, so far, to swim is practicable. You are a strong swimmer, I know, and a brave and resolute man.'

He laughed aloud, not bitterly, but with amused contempt. 'Yes, very brave and very resolute,' he said, 'but not so audacious—to put it at lowest—to run the risk of being branded as the greatest coward that ever disgraced the name of a soldier. Leave you here! You must think ill of me, indeed, to dream of it.'

'I was not thinking of you only, Francis; there are others beside myself to whom your life is precious. Think of poor Sir Reginald.'

'My father will grieve, no doubt,' he answered, 'but at least he will not die of shame, as he would do if his son came home as you would have him, and told him how he had secured his safety.'

If it came to Maria's lips to say that there was another person to whom Francis Drake was dearer even than to Sir Reginald, it did not pass beyond them; not that she felt any reluctance to refer to her cousin, but because she knew that it would give pain to her companion. Moreover, he might reply for Hester as he had replied for his father, and, as Maria was well aware, with equal truth. Though she was a woman, and another had been preferred before her, she did her the fullest justice. In her humility, indeed, she would have confessed, while denying that anyone could love Francis Drake as she did, that Hester was more worthy of him. If miracles have ceased in the world it is certain that saints among our women still exist.

After this one appeal she made no further effort to persuade her companion to leave her. He had wrapped his cloak about them both, and sat with one arm clasped around her close, waiting for the moment when Death should

come to fetch them, although not altogether without hope to balk him of his prey.

In the most terrible situations that the human mind can conceive the commonplace and ordinary incidents of life are never wanting.

In his last struggle to reach Sir Abraham and his wife, Drake had lost his watch, and his sudden discovery of the fact gave him a momentary disturbance that the instant afterwards evoked a bitter smile. Wishing to know how soon the daylight might be expected, he asked Maria to tell him the hour, which the moonlight, though faint and obscured by the flying clouds, still permitted her to do. She told him, at the same time handing him her own watch. 'Take it, dear Francis,' she said, 'I have done with time, and if you survive me——'

At this moment so heavy a sea struck the vessel, that it seemed to split from one end to another, though in fact it had but broken in two. The paddle-box, as Drake had expected,

was torn away and driven in upon them. With one arm he seized it, and with the other assisted his companion to its summit. Thanks to a torn plank, and the presence of an iron pin beneath the cavity, they obtained a sort of seat and also hand-hold. The sea did not immediately wash them over, though the whole deck was now submerged; there was even time for Drake to seize a plank as it whirled by them, which he thought might be of use in steering, or at least in steadying their perilous craft; but in less than a minute they were torn from the wreck and tossed in the deep.

Even when a vessel is going down for certain, it is a terrible thing to leave it in a heavy sea for an open boat, although we may be well persuaded that it is of the two the lesser evil. The vast mass of shattered timbers, though we know that it is doomed to destruction, seems, by its very bulk, to afford us greater security than the cockleshell—though it is still intact—in which we find ourselves.

The sense that there is 'only a plank,' as the phrase goes, between him and the sea is, to a landsman, indeed, appalling; but how much more dreadful was the situation of this unhappy pair, clinging to a fragment of wreckage which, sinking deep in the trough of the wave, did not rise as a boat does on the crest of it, but remained, at the best, half under water, and always in danger of turning over!

For the first few minutes every rushing wave seemed to drown them, and when it had gone by there was no time to catch their breath before they were overtaken by another. The water blinded their eyes and filled their ears. They fought for life in silence and darkness, and even—though the wind howled and roared around them—without an atmosphere in which to breathe. Then with that wonderful adaptability to circumstance which all humanity more or less possesses, they began to see and hear and breathe, and even to think.

In a half-mechanical manner Drake began

to use his plank, and not ineffectually, so as to turn the head of their unwieldy raft to meet the shock of the waves. The wind was driving them towards the shore, from which they were, perhaps, a couple of miles distant, and the dawn was breaking. Supposing matters grew no worse, it was just possible, unless exhaustion or the terrible cold which their wet limbs began to experience, should destroy them, that they might get alive, Drake thought, to land. But hardly had this ray of comfort broken in upon him than he became conscious that they were getting lower in the water, sinking deeper into the trough of every sea and rising less buoyantly with it.

Long before they could get to shore, at their present rate of progress, nay, in a few minutes, it was evident that they must be utterly overwhelmed.

There was clearly only one thing to be done.

'Dear love,' said Francis Drake, 'awhile ago I refused a request of yours which I am

now about to obey. I am going to try to swim to land, for help.'

'To leave me! Oh, my darling, do not leave me.'

The appeal was pitiful indeed, and seemed to show the perturbation of a mind that up to that moment had preserved unruffled calm.

'I would not do it, love, save for your own sweet sake, be sure,' he pleaded.

'I know it,' she answered simply; 'it is because the raft is sinking beneath its double burthen, and you think that I shall have a better chance for life alone. Forgive me if, for the moment, the thought of losing you—and of being left alone,' she added, with that love of truth which was as natural to her as the breath she drew, 'overcame for the moment——'

Her words were cut short by an angry sea, but there was no need to finish them. In the last few hours these two had got to understand, not only one another's lightest glance or gesture, but the thoughts of each other's souls.

Preparations Francis had none to make. He had long ago kicked off his boots and discarded his coat, and his cap had been carried away by the wind.

'I will not say "God bless you, my darling!"' he murmured in her ear, 'for you need no human intercessor, and least of all one such as I am. Keep a brave heart, love; we shall meet again.'

'I both hope and believe it,' she answered firmly; then added to herself, 'in Heaven.'

He kissed her pale, cold lips, and slid, as carefully as he could, so as not to disturb the balance of her crazy raft, into the sea. The next moment a huge wave sundered them.

CHAPTER XLVII.

ON SHORE.

It was long past daylight at Medbury, but no news had come to the Castle of its missing tenants. In the tower-chamber above the gateway, to which, because it commanded the greatest stretch of view, they had removed at dawn, sat the old Baronet and Hester. That terrible watch-night had told upon them both. Sir Reginald looked five years older, and years at his age leave a deeper mark than at any other. It often happens, very suddenly, without any shock, physical or mental, to cause it, that to-day we see a fine old man, and to-morrow a spectre, the mere shadow of his former self. This was not, however, quite the case with Sir Reginald; he did not look broken, but only

ready to break. He was bearing the suspense, but with utmost effort. It was plain he had no reserve of strength for any catastrophe. If the news came, which was now almost sure to come, Hester said to herself, 'It will kill him.'

He sat with her hand in his at the wide-open window, for so he would have it, listening for every sound, with the wind blowing back his silver hair, and whispering of wreck and ruin. It had moderated at last, having done its cruel work, and the clouds were clearing from the face of the sky. It was Hester's presence and sympathy, as he told her, which had hitherto sustained him. 'Without you, my dear,' he whispered, 'he would never have seen me alive, even if he should be spared to do so; nor will I say, even if I do not see him, that I have little to thank you for; I shall never forget you, never.'

On the other hand, Hester was scarcely less indebted to her companion for her comparative calm; the necessity she felt under to comfort

and strengthen him as far as she was able, had in a measure mitigated her misery, but not because it turned her thoughts from her own wretched forebodings; for, though he did not know it, he bewailed with her a common woe.

At eight o'clock another messenger arrived from Philip Langton, bearing a second letter. The vessel had gone down, it said—of that there was no doubt—but nine persons had been picked up alive, and it was just possible—though only just, for the place where the *Javelin* had gone down had been discovered—that more might yet be saved. From the foremast, the top of which had been just discerned above the water, three persons—the mate, John Garnet, a sailor, and the little black boy—had been taken off, and from a portion of the poop, which had floated within half a mile of the shore, six persons—among them Mr. Purcell and his wife, the two last in so extreme a state of exhaustion that they had been unable to reach the Rectory, and had been taken to the hotel overlooking

the jetty; but none of the rescued persons had been as yet in a condition to give a collected account of what had taken place. The horsemen Mr. Langton had despatched had not yet returned, but there were rumours of much wreckage having been cast up along the coast. Notwithstanding that from this it was clear that no survivors from the ship—if more survivors there should be—would be brought to Medbury, but must needs have what flickering spark of life remained in them nursed and fed at Shingleton, Hester by no means relaxed the preparations she had caused to be made from the first for their reception and proper treatment. Again and again she visited the rooms of Sir Abraham and Lady Barton, and of her cousin, to see that all was ready for them; and she even had another room prepared for Francis Drake, in case it might be expedient for him to shorten his journey ever so little and be tended at the Castle.

How forlorn and melancholy they looked,

fated, like mausoleums, to receive their inmates only after death; or rather, like cenotaphs, mausoleums that must stand for ever empty because their rightful tenants had been held captive by the tyrannous and remorseless sea! The companionship in which she was placed compelled Hester's thoughts to dwell chiefly on Francis Drake, but they turned with no less of sorrow towards her cousin, cut off in her youth and on the brink of the accomplishment of her heart's desire. That she was gone to Heaven was as certain as there was a Heaven for such pure and pious souls to go to; but whatever we poor mortals may preach, or even pray, the exchange of one world for another by those we love, however advantageous we feel it to be for themselves, is to us who are left behind and lose them a matter of intense regret and pain. For her aunt, too, Hester had a sincere affection, and had she had no other loss to deplore, Lady Barton's death would have left a void in her heart not easy to

be filled. 'Perhaps,' thought Hester involuntarily, 'she has met dear mamma by this time, and they are once more loving sisters.' Even for Sir Abraham's fate she had a genuine tear. He had been kind to her after his fashion, and, indeed, could hardly have been called unkind (or so she now thought) to anyone.

'Where are they all at this moment?' was the awful question which her heart was putting to her in spite of herself. 'Behind the veil,' we say, in our inadequate and conventional phraseology; but to us the separation that has taken place is in reality of quite another kind. It is no veil that shuts us out for ever, or what seems for ever, from those dear familiar faces, but a wall of adamant reaching from earth to sky, through which no voice can come to gladden us with its 'All is well,' or (awful thought) rack us with tidings of another kind.

In Shingleton there was broadcast bereavement, and a desolation as deep as that which reigned at Medbury. In its humbler houses,

though it was not perhaps felt at the moment, there was even additional cause for sorrow, in anxiety for the future, for many a household had lost its breadwinner; but for the present they had this poor advantage over the watchers in the Castle, that they were not compelled to inaction. Some manned the fishing-vessels and scoured the sea in the neighbourhood of the wreck, in hopes of lighting on a survivor; some busied themselves in tending the few survivors that had been washed ashore alive; some crowded beach and jetty straining their eyes for the return of the boats, and interchanging hopes that were not yet utterly merged in fears. Others, again, searched the coast, on which the sea had already begun to cast up its dead.

To these last, when all chance of any more survivors being brought to Shingleton seemed to have died away, Philip Langton joined himself. He rode for miles along the sands and upon the cliff tops, sweeping the sea with his

pocket-glass, and making inquiry at every hamlet concerning the wreck. His messengers had been there before him, but they had gone on in pursuance of his instructions, and much had happened in the interval. The fragments of the ill-fated *Javelin* now strewed bay and creek and cove, and many a cottage had become a mortuary. Identification of the bodies had but rarely taken place, as the passengers of the ill-fated vessel were all from Shingleton, which was some miles distant.

The remains of Sir Abraham and Lady Barton, however, had both been recognised, not only because in life they had been widely known, but because they had come ashore, as was gravely said, though with no intentional irreverence, in their carriage, the which, though almost knocked to pieces, had retained sufficient likeness of itself to be known for what it had been, and had still contained its former tenants. In the next cottage to that in which they were for the present housed, at the little

fishing-village of Merk, lay the corpse of a young lady believed to be their daughter. It had been thrown ashore along with some wreckage, which looked, as Philip Langton was told, like barrel-staves, but which he at once recognised as remnants of a paddle-box. Though the sea had broken up the raft it had spared its burthen, and Maria Barton's face was as beautiful in death as it had ever been. In life Philip Langton had never seen her, but there was a certain likeness to her mother, as he remembered her, which would have convinced him of her identity, even without the corroboration which was not wanting. A handkerchief by which she had been fastened to the wreck, evidently not by her own hand, was given him, with the initials F. D. upon it; and he understood at once by whose loving care in that last hour of her existence this precaution had been taken.

Having satisfied himself as to the fates of those in whom Hester, as he thought, would

feel the most concern, Philip Langton returned to Shingleton, where, as he expected, he found Mrs. West already arrived. Her presence was very welcome to him, for it was difficult to see how, with the best will in the world to help her, he could himself be of much use to Hester, who, it was evident, stood in need above all things of a female friend. The thanks with which he overwhelmed the new comer were not only embarrassing but unintelligible to her. It seemed to that kind-hearted and genuine woman that nothing was more natural than that she should have exchanged her comfortable home at a moment's notice for a house of sorrow, for the sake of a fatherless and friendless girl. She undertook, too, as though it had been an obvious duty, the terrible task of breaking the tidings which Langton had brought from Merk, an ordeal the thought of which had given him inexpressible misery. Up to that moment, notwithstanding his devotion to Hester, his experience of human life

had not been favourable as regards the other sex. The views of an old bachelor are generally cynical with respect to woman, because they have little or no knowledge of her noblest attributes, the courage and self-denial she exhibits when those she loves are in trouble or sorrow; and Philip Langton's case had, as we know, been much more unfortunate in this respect than any bachelor.

'I always knew you were a good woman, dear Mrs. West,' he said, 'but I had no idea you were an angel.'

'That is just like you men,' she answered, smiling; 'you are never enthusiastic about us (unless we are very young and pretty), except when we are able to relieve you of some unpleasant office. I dare say there are some women whom you have set down as the reverse of angels on quite as insufficient grounds.'

Langton felt there was some truth in this. His dead wife, to judge by what the Rector and Hester had said of her, could not have been so

destitute of good as he had imagined her to be; and much, doubtless, had one known all, was to be said too for that unhappy woman lying in the fisherman's cottage, calm and stern as a dead queen.

After some refreshment, of which, though she had no more appetite for it than he had, Mrs. West compelled herself to partake, they drove over to Medbury.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE HEIRESS.

It was five o'clock in the afternoon, and Sir Reginald and Hester still sat in the tower-chamber, having kept watch there for the last twelve hours, when a sound of wheels broke upon their ears.

'Hark, hark!' cried the old man, 'they are coming.'

'Sir Reginald, I entreat you to be calm,' pleaded his companion earnestly, 'and not to nourish false hopes. It is not humanly possible——'

'You are right,' murmured the other with a groan; 'they are not carriage wheels at all; it is a gig.'

The vehicle was still a long way off and

hidden by the avenue, but the old man's ears, accustomed to every country sound, had not deceived him. Still with some lingering embers of hope within him, he added, 'Who can it be?'

'It is doubtless Mr. Langton,' she answered with gentle firmness. 'No other carriage, perhaps, can just now be procured in Shingleton' (this was likely enough), 'and he promised to come over if the worst came to the worst, and when he should be quite sure.'

It was cold comfort, but the time, as Hester felt, was gone by for comfort; if she could only persuade the old man, as alas! she could not persuade herself, to be resigned to Heaven's will, it was the best she could hope for.

'My brave boy,' he murmured; then he broke down, and the tears rolled down his furrowed cheeks without his making an effort to hide them.

'The father of such a son should have more courage,' said Hester reprovingly, though she

too was weeping bitterly. 'If he could see you, dear Sir Reginald, as perhaps he does see you—— Oh, great heavens!' She started from her chair, and, crying, 'Look, look, Francis is coming to us alive, alive!' threw her arms above her head and fell on the floor in a dead faint.

It was not in nature that Sir Reginald should not look for such a sight as that; his son, driven in a gig by a farmer's lad, looking pale and wan and woebegone enough, but still alive, as she had said; but no sooner had he convinced himself of that blissful fact than he applied himself to his companion's restoration. All the instincts of a true gentleman and a grateful nature returned to him at once, so soon as that weight of woe was removed from him. Next to Francis—and Francis was safe—Hester had won for herself the innermost place in the old man's heart.

When his vehement summons of the bell was answered by a domestic, he first sent for

Maria's maid, and not until he had seen Hester in her charge and giving signs of animation did he direct his tottering steps to greet his son in the great hall. The meeting was a very moving one; the old man, overcome with joy and gratitude to Heaven, embraced him as he had not done since he was a child; but Francis, while returning his caress, looked as sad and stern as one risen from the dead.

'They are all gone,' he said with infinite pathos in answer to his father's inquiry. 'Our dear girl is now a saint in Heaven.' For many minutes he could say no more; the recollection of that parting scene had utterly unmanned him. What struck Sir Reginald, even in that terrible time, as strange, was that, presently, when he proposed that they should go to Hester, Francis declined to do so.

'Not just now, father,' he said. The fact was, that with his mind so full of Maria's goodness and self-devotion, the young fellow felt that it would have been a species of dis-

loyalty to her memory, but he excused himself on the ground of physical weakness. He was, indeed, very weak and ill from the fatigues and exhaustion he had undergone, and only by slow degrees was he able to narrate his story.

After leaving the raft, if it could be called such, with its precious burthen, he had swum little more than half the distance to land when his strength failed him. Fortunately, he met with a floating spar, and assisted by it had contrived to reach the shore, though more dead than alive; the sea cast him up, indeed, like a piece of wreck in a sandy creek a mile or two on the Scoresby side of Merk, where a fisherman found him quite insensible. He had taken him to his hut on the beach, where he had remained for many hours with scarce a sign of life. On his recovery he had gone into the village just after Langton's departure from it, and learnt the full extent of the calamity that had befallen him.

His emotions on seeing Maria were such as no one who had known Francis Drake, however cognisant of his affectionate nature, would probably have thought him capable of, and it was with difficulty, and only driven by the thought of what must be his father's anxiety on his account, that he could tear himself away from her unconscious form.

No doubt it was the recollection of what she had said to him on the wreck when she told him that she had found out his secret, and was content, or at least resigned, to the consequences of that discovery, which made his conscience so tender with respect to her cousin; but as it happened, even had he seen Hester, she would have given him no embarrassment; she had only recovered from one fainting fit to fall into another, and by the time Mrs. West reached the Castle stood in even greater need of her services than that lady had anticipated; indeed, she was seriously, and even dangerously ill. The anguish she had undergone during the

last twelve hours—all the worse for her since for her companion's sake she had concealed it—had proved too much for her constitution. It was three months and more before she rose from a sick-bed.

She was thus spared, however, from the painful incidents of the next few days, and from all knowledge of them. The burial of the ill-fated passengers of the *Javelin* in Shingleton churchyard was an incident not forgotten in the little town and its neighbourhood for many a year. Francis Drake had by that time recovered his self-possession, but no one could behold without emotion the young man's silent grief as he bowed his head beside the coffin of his betrothed. Without disloyalty to the girl who had won his heart he might truly have said of Maria Barton, 'There is none like her—none;' and, indeed, he often expressed himself to that effect, not a little to Sir Reginald's discontent.

'You should have seen Hester's conduct

that dreadful night, Frank,' he would say to his son a little fretfully. 'Never, never can I forget her unselfish devotion.'

'I can well believe it, sir,' was the somewhat sympathetic response. 'Hester is as good as gold.'

It is not probable that he made use of that expression by design, to mark the difference between spiritual and material goodness, but the fact was that his reverence for Maria was of the deepest and most devotional kind, and resented all comparison. As soon as he had satisfied himself that Hester was out of danger and on the road to recovery, he went abroad to regain, in change of scene, the health and strength which for the time had failed him; and though he remained away some time, when he returned she was only just convalescent. So shaken was she by the catastrophe that had at one blow swept away both aunt and cousin, that she did not at first comprehend its consequences; they were friends so near and dear to

her that it did not strike her that they were also relatives, and that in Sir Abraham she had lost the only connection she had in the world. In that state of semi-consciousness that accompanies the slow return from fever, she had watched Nurse Arkell, as she tended her and busied herself about her room, with amazement. It was a great satisfaction to have the dear old woman with her, but she wondered how, like the fly in amber, she got there. To Mrs. West, having seen and recognised her in the intervals of her first seizure, she was accustomed, but the occasional presence by her bedside of Grace and Marion was inexplicable to her. She hardly liked to ask about it lest it should turn out that they were not actually there at all, but were only the offspring of her imagination. Another question which was often on her lips, but which she had not the courage to utter, was 'How and where is Francis Drake?' She was aware that he had come home alive from the wreck, but her recollection of him as caught in that

fleeting glance of him as he sat in the gig was of one very weak and ill. 'Was it possible,' she asked of herself with sickening fear, 'that he had eventually succumbed to the fatigue and horrors of that dreadful night?' What somewhat reassured her, however, upon this point was, that more than once—if she had but known it, it was more than once a day—she had fancied she heard Sir Reginald's voice on the other side of her door; and if his son had been dead she did not believe that he would have survived him.

The first words she spoke were addressed to Nurse Arkell, who was putting something sweet scented and cool on a handkerchief on her forehead.

'What has happened, nurse?'

'A great deal has happened, my darling,' was the gentle reply, 'but you are not fit to know it yet.'

'Whose step did I hear just now outside the door?'

'Mrs. West's, I suppose; or perhaps Miss Grace's, or Miss Marion's.'

'It was a man's step.'

'Then it was Mr. Langton's; he is often here; indeed as often as at Shingleton, where he means to stay, he says—Heaven bless him! —till he sees you up and about; or perhaps it was Sir Reginald. The old gentleman is over-anxious about you; he would have had what they call a trained nurse from town if it had not been for Mrs. West, who knew what was best for you, and that you would rather have your old Arkell to look after you than all the trained nurses in Christendom.'

Hester asked no more questions just then; she had heard enough, and more than enough. It was evident to her that Francis was not at Medbury. Where was he? Where could he be?

That no new misfortune could have happened she felt, however, pretty confident, from Nurse Arkell's manner, which was exceed-

ingly bright and cheerful. It was not the kind of cheerfulness that is put on to keep up the spirits of the invalid; and, moreover, she had watched her through half-shut eyes and when supposed to be incapable of notice, and it had struck her in a vague and wondering way how very bright and pleased the old woman looked. If she had been capable of reasoning on the matter she would no doubt have been shocked at it, but as it was it remained one of the many mysteries with which for the present she was unable to grapple. Her next attempt to get information was made on Mrs. West, and proved more successful.

'How very good and kind you are to me,' she murmured one morning.

'Am I? I am glad you think so, my dear,' was the quiet reply. 'It is such a beautiful day that I think a little July sunshine cannot hurt you,' and with that she opened the window.

'July? Is it July? Then how long have I been ill?'

'Very nearly three months. However, you have been getting better for some time, my dear, and "the slower," you know, "the surer."'

'Three months! And have you been here three months?'

'Certainly; and Grace and Marion too.'

'What, have you left your own home to come and——'

'Hush, hush! if you excite yourself like that—and especially begin to cry, which is strictly forbidden—I will not answer you another question. As to leaving home, it was a very good time to leave London and get the country air; and why should we not pay such an old friend as you a long visit? It must be allowed that you entertain us very hospitably, but you don't grudge it us, my dear, do you?'

To Hester this speech was wholly unintelligible. As Mrs. West looked into her

wondering face the tears came into that good lady's eyes. It touched her to see that the change that had taken place in the sick girl's worldly circumstances had not even entered into her mind—that she had so mourned the loss of her relatives that the idea of deriving any advantage from it had never so much as occurred to her.

'We are your guests, dear Hester, you see,' she explained softly. 'I know right well that you had far rather that it was not so, but fate has decided otherwise. This house is yours by inheritance; you have become a very important young lady indeed.'

Never was such news received by next of kin or heir-at-law with so little satisfaction. Sir Abraham, who had no relations of his own, had left all his vast estate to his wife, with remainder to his daughter, who had, as we know, survived them, though but for so short a space. Hester's tears fell fast. Never more would poor Lady Barton sit in her pride of

place within those walls. All that Sir Abraham could now call his own was a few feet of earth in the churchyard upon the hill. It was, indeed, a terrible example of what one day can bring forth to us helpless mortals—the sport of fate and circumstance. After this news had been told her, Hester lay very quiet, revolving many things, but without one touch of selfish complacency; indeed, had her thoughts dwelt on herself at all they could not, from the nature of things, have been, in one respect at least, very encouraging. If Francis Drake's old affection for her should revive, or even become as great as was her love for him, she knew him too well to suppose it possible that he would ever confess as much. He could never endure it to be said, that having been balked of wedding one heiress of Medbury, he had offered his hand to the next, like some matrimonial Vicar of Bray. Her feelings, in fact, towards him just then were very much what his own had been towards her immediately

after the catastrophe. She would have thought it disloyalty to Maria to allow her heart to dwell upon the bridegroom of whom death had deprived her. And yet—and yet, on a certain day when she had become much stronger and had been moved into a sitting-room on the upper floor, and she suddenly heard a dear familiar voice in the corridor without, what was it but love, the love she had 'scotched not killed,' which made her heart stand still? There was no need for old Sir Reginald to tell her, as he did—in tones that he almost mistrusted lest they should reveal his own secret hope—that his beloved son had returned home.

What with the Captain's pride and Hester's scruples it is doubtful, indeed, whether an event so everyway convenient and to be wished for as their union could ever have been brought about, had it not been for Mrs. West, whose woman's wit not only discovered their secret, but smoothed the way to its revelation. Even

when men have the sagacity they do not possess the tact for these matters. Philip Langton, for example, and Francis Drake, who had become fast friends, and were neither of them unconscious that this friendship was in part owed to their common interest in Hester Darrell, might have walked and talked and smoked together till the younger man had grown grey-headed without the affair in question being furthered by a hair's-breadth. Mrs. West, on the other hand, who had the faculty, shared by other good mothers, of attracting to herself young gentlemen of merit, was not long before she gained the confidence of the Captain. He told her all we know of his relations to Maria, and was overcome with melancholy in the narration. A man would have told him to 'cheer up,' but Mrs. West, on the contrary, rather encouraged his dolorousness. She knew that that was as near a way as any, and not an uncommon one, to the renewal of love. All the ingredients were to be found in it, and,

like a wise builder, she made use of the old materials for the foundation of a new structure. As the plan of it had long been in his mind, though the work, for reasons with which we are acquainted, had had to be abandoned, her task was all the easier. When she saw him reduced to hopeless despondency, she turned on him like a tigress, and inquired how he dared—yes, dared—so long to neglect the injunctions of his beloved Maria, who with her dying lips had bade him be happy with his Hester. Her lightest wish should under such a circumstance have been a covenant to him; nor could she understand how a gentleman and a Christian should have so long ignored them. The poor Captain, who had, perhaps, rather piqued himself upon the delicacy of his scruples, suddenly discovered that he had been behaving in a very discreditable manner.

'But she gave me to understand,' he stammered, and it was noticeable that his 'she' for the first time referred to the living object of his

adoration, 'that she was engaged to somebody else.'

'A very good reason, sir, for not pressing your attentions upon her, then; but now that you know, upon the very best authority, that she only allowed you to go away with that impression, because she would not stand in the way of her cousin's happiness, I fail to see your reason for hesitation.'

'But she has never told me that—that her heart was free.'

'It is not free; it is yours,' she put in quickly, 'if you had—I do not say the good sense, but the good feeling—to perceive it. Your conduct, Captain Drake, amazes me.'

'But then she is so very rich,' he murmured.

'Oh, I see,' replied his companion relentlessly; 'pride is at the bottom of it. Perhaps you would like me to speak for you?'

A proposition he accepted with the utmost gratitude.

It is hardly necessary to say that her mission did not require much diplomacy to bring it to a successful issue. Frank would probably have won Hester in any case; but the desire of her heart had a fuller completeness from the knowledge that it was accomplished with Maria's approval and recognition. There could be no thought of rivalry between them, or any cause for silence even on the single topic so often ignored between husband and wife. On the contrary, their hearts were, if possible, more closely bound together by the memory of one so loved and revered by both. The good we do is not always buried with us; and so it was with the influence of Maria Barton, which hung over this happy pair like a benediction, and extended even to another generation.

There is a little Maria growing up at Medbury, as her parents fondly believe, after her namesake's pattern, who talks of her dead cousin with grave enthusiasm, as if she had

known her in the flesh, and all the summer through tends the flowers upon her grave upon the hill. Sir Reginald would have preferred a grandson to a granddaughter, for where are we if our baronetcies become extinct? But it is impossible for him to be disappointed at anything that Hester does. He knows now from experience that a daughter may be as great a blessing as a son. Frank is not quite so solicitous about 'his position in the county' as the old man could wish; but Hester assures him that, without any bidding for favour, there is no one so beloved and respected in all the country side, and Hester is always right. She cannot be brought to believe in the family ghost, notwithstanding the proof that they both had of its existence in that terrible night they passed alone together. Sir Abraham's watch was found to have stopped at the very hour (nine o'clock) when Sir Reginald heard the ancestral cry which betokened the passing away of the Castle into other hands. It had never struck

him that it ought by rights to have been heard a second time when poor Maria perished—an argument which Hester very naturally refrains from making use of. She confines herself to contending that the affairs of the owners of Medbury, however important, are carried on independently of supernatural agencies.

On the other hand, she does not consider, so far as her husband's position is concerned, that it requires much aid from external sources, or to be 'countenanced' even by the Lord Lieutenant himself. Though excellent friends with them, they do not, in fact, much cultivate the local magnates, unless, indeed, the Archdeacon and his wife—for the Castle and the Rectory are much nearer to one another than they used to be—can be considered such. Still less do Captain and Mrs. Drake aim at making a figure in society. It must be confessed, indeed, that they are not very fashionable people, and much prefer the country to the town. There is no more hospitable house than Medbury in Eng-

land; but outside its walls Hester's world is small, and comprises only a few hundred persons, mostly poor, with whom, however, she has very familiar relations. When some of them say, as they often do, 'that she reminds them of Miss Maria as was,' her heart is very glad. She prefers that commendation to any success that may be attainable in circles of fashion.

She has not, I think, very pleasant recollections of her one London season, though there is one person associated with it whose memory always keeps its freshness and its brightness—that of her 'dear young papa.' How happy he would have been to see her so happy!

The Wests, of course, are frequent visitors at Medbury, and still more so Philip Langton; he is hale and strong as ever, and much less grave and reticent; most welcome of guests, he redoubles the sunshine of home; he arrives invariably with a parcel of the latest London toys under his arm for his goddaughter, and

with a 'May I?' to his smiling host, kisses his wife under his very eyes. He brings the news to Medbury from the great world without, tells them of Lord Thirlmere's marriage with the financier's daughter, and of Lady Jane Crummock's *mésalliance* with the curate of Bayswater. The story of Mr. Digby Mason being shot in a duel at Nice, in connection with five kings at écarté, he reserves for his host's private ear over their cigars; but, eventually, of course, it reaches Hester. She is quite as much shocked by it as Mrs. Brabazon was, whom her nephew treated ill in money matters. She speaks of herself as broken-hearted under the affliction, but bears up, and is as fashionable as her diminished means will permit.

Next to their 'young master'—for so Frank Drake is called, and will probably continue to be so till he becomes Sir Francis—Philip Langton is the most popular man with the Medbury household; while by Nurse Arkell, as the

Colonel's friend and the guardian of dear Miss Hester (a slip she still often makes in speaking of her beloved mistress), he is almost worshipped. He often has a chat with her about old times in the cozy little parlour devoted to her use, and she is very frank and open with him.

We have all our defects, even though we may not have all those virtues which certainly belonged to Nurse Arkell, and the particular weakness of this excellent woman was her partisanship. To say that she 'had her prejudices' would be much too mild a phrase to express her feelings with respect to all connected with the family she has served so faithfully. The Colonel was a saint in Heaven, and dear Miss Hester almost too good to live. People that were not Darrells might be also estimable in their way, but stood on an altogether different and lower plane. Captain Francis Drake, for example, was a nice young gentleman

enough, though he had been rewarded very considerably beyond his deserts; and she had nothing to say against Sir Reginald, except that the airs some people gave themselves about their family were preposterous.

'Still, my good Arkell,' Philip Langton once banteringly said to her, 'they have a family ghost which the Darrells could never afford to keep.'

'I have never seen it,' returned the old lady incredulously; 'and even if they have, have not we'—we!—'got a family motto as has always turned out true? Look at them Bartons, how they were all swept away for us into the ocean.'

'But, my dear Mrs. Arkell,' said Philip reprovingly, 'that is surely not a subject for congratulation; at the very best one can only say of it, as regards you and yours, that "it is an ill wind that blows nobody good."'

'It was not the wind, Mr. Langton,' re-

turned the old woman with triumphant solemnity; 'it was the sea as did it.

> "The luck of the Darrells, whate'er it shall be,
> Shall come by the sea, and go by the sea."

And now I trust it's come for good.'

THE END.

PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
LONDON